

The Complete Ovid Stories

by

The Professor

The Complete Ovid Stories

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Ovid I: Shortcut Through Ovid

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“Do you have any fucking idea where we are?”

“Can it, Steve,” I said calmly as I watched mile after mile of gently sloping farmland cruise by at eighty miles an hour. “Randy knows where he’s going.”

‘I hope Randy knows where he’s going,’ I thought. For the last ten miles, I hadn’t seen a road sign of any kind. I didn’t know if we were in Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, or the dark side of the moon.

We had left South Bend on Wednesday, blowing off nearly a week of classes. Some of our fraternity brothers were taking notes for us, so we wouldn’t be totally lost when we got back. It would mean we’d miss a lot of classes, though, but what the hell? How often does Texas play Notre Dame? Besides, South Bend was getting cold and gray as October slipped away, and the forecast for the weekend in Austin was lots of sunshine and temperatures in the seventies. In fact, as we had travelled south from Kansas City, the temperatures had risen into the mid seventies, causing me to wish I had worn shorts instead of jeans.

The trip had been my idea; I’ll admit that. I had a cousin in Austin who’d agreed to put us up, and he had even promised to find some girls for us. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity. This was a one game only series, and who knew how long it would be again before Notre Dame and Texas played against each other? Both had national title aspirations, so it should be a great game, I reasoned. I approached Randy with the idea. Randy had always been my best friend in the fraternity. He and I had pledged as freshmen and had roomed together ever since. Also, Randy had a car—a fiery red Trans-Am that looked like it was going ninety even when it was standing still. His folks had given it to him for getting a 4.0 his junior year.

Steve and Carl were two more guys who had been in our pledge class

three years before. Unlike Randy and I, who both took school pretty seriously, Steve and Carl floated by with 2.5 averages. They were smart enough, but to them, every day was party day. When they heard we were headed for Austin, they tagged along somewhat uninvited. At least, I thought, they would share expenses with us. Unlike Randy and I, they hadn't worried about picking up class assignments. They figured they could catch up when we got back—if they felt like it.

We got as far as Kansas City by Wednesday night. It was late, but we took a little time to party before holing up in a Motel 6 for the night. Kansas City isn't a great college town, but the bars and clubs in the Plaza district proved to be a great source of action. Nobody managed to get laid, but a lot of heavy petting went on in one of the clubs. By Thursday morning, we were all a little under the weather. Randy was driving. He wouldn't trust anyone else but me to drive his car, and I had begged off with a dull headache. Steve and Carl had gotten pretty well wasted, so they slept in the back seat while Randy drove and I navigated.

"Head straight south out of Kansas City on US 69," I told Randy.

"Hey, sixty-nine, mighty fine," Carl managed weakly from the back seat.

"Don't we want to head out I-70 to catch I-35?" Randy asked.

"We could," I agreed, "but this way, we avoid the turnpike. It will be cheaper, and we can cut across on two-lane roads and hook back onto I-35 in Oklahoma. Less cops, too, I would imagine, so we can cruise."

It had been good advice at first. We didn't see a cop all morning and were able to cruise along at eighty. We stopped off for lunch in some little no-name town and hit the road again, after Steve and Carl had dived into a liquor store next to the cafe and picked up a fifth of bourbon. "A little hair of the dog that bit us," Steve explained, twisting off the top in the back seat. I don't know how those two managed to drink again. It would be Friday before I could face the thought of another drink.

Steve and Carl nipped at the bourbon while Randy and I tried to figure out where to go next. "You should be coming to the road we need in about ten miles," I told him.

It was at that moment that a battered red farm truck chose to pull out from an unmarked side road, directly in our path.

"Jesus! Look out!" I screamed, but my voice was drowned out by the squeal of the Z-rated tires on the Trans-Am as we skidded sideways directly into...

"God, that was close!" Randy breathed.

Close? I couldn't think of any way we could have missed the truck. We had been headed directly toward it. The last thing I had seen before closing my eyes and bracing for impact was one of the big external gas tanks slung under the frame of the truck. We were going to hit it with no chance of escape.

But we had escaped. I looked around to see what had happened to the truck, but to my surprise, there was nothing on the road. He must have gone directly across the highway, I reasoned. Perhaps there was another little unmarked farm road on the other side.

"Where did he go?" I asked.

"I don't know," Randy admitted, screwing with the rear-view mirror to try to see the truck. "Wherever he went, I'm glad it wasn't into this car."

"This calls for another drink!" Steve shouted with bravado from the back seat. It was met by Carl's childish giggling.

"I think that's it up ahead, Matt," Randy told me, changing the subject.

I looked ahead about a quarter of a mile at a green highway sign which said 'Ovid 20 Miles.'

"There's no Ovid on my map," I said. "And besides, this road can't be the right one. It's too soon. The road you want has to be at least three miles further."

"Well, it looks like it's going the right way," Randy argued. Without

further discussion, Randy turned onto the road to Ovid.

I looked carefully at my map. It was a good one, although not highly detailed, but I was sure that a road as good as this one should have been on it. And there was no sign of a town called Ovid. I mentioned this to Randy, only to be interrupted by Steve with a childish drunken “Are we there yet?” Carl gave out a sound halfway between a snort and a giggle. He was equally drunk.

“Quiet, guys,” I scolded.

“Who are you?” Steve asked sarcastically. “Our mother?”

Carl chortled again.

“Maybe it’s a new road,” Randy suggested. “It might not be on the map yet. And as for the town, maybe it’s too small to be on a map like that.”

He had a point. The map was a couple of years old, and the road was smooth, seamless blacktop stretching to the horizon. Also, if Ovid was very small, it might not qualify to appear on the map. At least we were travelling in the right direction, and I knew that eventually, we would run into I-35, so no damage was done. Still, I would have felt more comfortable if we had taken the road we had originally decided upon. But I was too relieved having narrowly avoided death to argue.

Randy was a safe driver, but a fast one. Eighty was nothing in a Trans-Am, and the newly harvested fields and groves of trees shot by with alarming speed. Randy’s confidence and speed increased as we encountered no traffic in either direction on the road. The speedometer had begun to hover around ninety.

It was then that we heard the siren.

“Shit!” Randy cursed. I looked around away from the afternoon sun to see the familiar flashing blue and red lights of a police cruiser.

“Where did he come from?” I asked. I had been watching the road for speed traps but had seen nothing since we had turned off onto the road to Ovid. But then again, I hadn’t spotted the farm truck either.

"I don't know," Randy replied. "I've been watching, too, and I never saw him. Hell, there hasn't even been a turnoff on this road, so I don't know where he was hiding."

"Outrun him, man!" Carl called out. "You got a Trans-Am."

"Right, Carl, and the cop's got a radio," I said with disgust. It was hard to believe Carl was my age since he usually acted like a kid and Steve wasn't much better. Some people never seemed to grow up.

Randy brought the Trans-Am to a smooth stop on the gravel shoulder, and the police cruiser pulled up behind him, lights on but siren off. Turning around, I could see that there appeared to be only one officer in the cruiser. He looked to be a pro, tall in gray-blue uniform shirts. He was wearing the mirrored sunglasses which always seemed popular in law enforcement.

The officer got out of the car. He was hatless and about six foot three. Unlike the stereotype of local law enforcement officers, he appeared to not have an ounce of fat on him. His movements were almost graceful, and there was a purposeful quickness to his movements which made me think he could probably outrun a jackrabbit. He looked big and intimidating as he strode toward our car.

"Is he state or county?" Randy asked, watching him approach in the mirror.

"I don't know," I replied. "I haven't seen any state highway markers, so he's probably county."

The officer stopped a few feet away from and slightly behind Randy's door. "Could you step out of the car, sir?"

Randy slowly opened his door while I watched. Carl and Steve giggled in the back seat.

"Hide that bottle, you idiots," I whispered to them, hoping the cop couldn't hear.

"I need your license and registration," the officer told Randy, almost as if it were a mantra. I pulled the registration slip off the visor and put it on the driver's seat while Randy fished out his license. The officer

studied it carefully for a minute through his mirrored glasses, then handed them back to Randy. "Do you have any idea how fast you were going?"

"Um, sixty-five?" Randy guessed, knowing full well that he had topped eighty.

"You were going eighty-nine miles an hour," the officer said precisely. "I'm going to have to take you in to see the Judge."

"Take me in?" Randy protested. "But can't you just write me a ticket? I mean, we're on our way to Austin for the game Saturday and..."

"I have to take you in," the officer insisted. "The speed limit through here is still only fifty-five. You were more than twenty miles an hour over that, so I'm required to take you in to see the Judge. Wait right here and Officer Mercer will ride over with you."

"But there's no room," Randy argued. Besides, I wondered, who was Officer Mercer? I could swear there had been only one cop in that patrol car.

"Your two backseat passengers can ride with me. They appear to be drinking, so I'll need some ID on them, too."

Carl and Steve sullenly piled themselves out of the backseat, fishing into their pockets for wallets. Fortunately, I thought, all of us were twenty-one, so they couldn't get us on any underage drinking or contributing to the delinquency of a minor charges. The officer checked their IDs, grunted, and returned them.

"I'm Officer Mercer," a voice said next to my window. "Please get out of the car and I'll climb in back."

"Would you like to...?" My voice trailed off. Officer Mercer looked identical to the officer who had come up to the car first. I don't just mean the uniform. I mean they were as identical as twins.

"Would I like to what?"

"Uh... would you like to ride up front?"

"I'll ride in back," he said. Of course, I thought. If I were in back, I could

get the drop on him. He wanted to be behind both Randy and me.

“OK.” I climbed out of the car. “Are you and the other officer related?”

“Not exactly,” was all he replied as I got out of his way to allow him to crawl into the back seat.

I wanted to press him on his relation to the other cop. I know the uniform and the sunglasses helped to make them look alike, but they appeared absolutely identical to me. There was something odd about this, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

“This is illegal in the state of Oklahoma,” the officer said behind me.

“What?” I asked, turning around to see the officer holding the bourbon bottle Steve and Carl had been nipping from.

“This bottle,” he said. “It's against state law to have an open bottle in your vehicle.”

“I'm sorry,” I managed. “We didn't know.”

“Has the driver been drinking?”

“No, sir,” I replied. “Neither Randy, nor I were drinking.”

The officer just grunted and put the bottle next to him.

Shortly, our two cars were caravanning into town, the cruiser in front. I noticed as it passed us that the logo on the side read ‘Ovid Municipal Police.’ I had an idea. It was a long shot, but I decided to try it.

“Officer,” I began, “you and your partner are town cop...er...police?”

“That's right, son.”

Aha! “Well then, aren't you a little out of your jurisdiction out here in the country?”

I couldn't turn around, but I swear I could feel him smile. “You crossed into Ovid the minute you turned off the main highway.”

“Oh.” I had heard of small towns that had done that sort of thing. They would annex land several miles from the actual town for any number of reasons, but I had never heard of a town annexing twenty miles of

open farmland. I thought about mentioning this, but something in my gut said it wouldn't do any of us any good. I didn't want to piss these guys off.

Randy was a model driver, following the lead officer at a respectful distance. Soon, we crested a tree-lined hill and I could look down into a pleasant little valley where a town had grown. From the top of the hill, I could see that Ovid was larger than I had expected. It appeared to be about the size of my hometown, which was about fifteen thousand people. I could see the well-kept tree-lined residential streets, broken occasionally by wider business streets which converged on a downtown business district with a collection of office buildings and retail stores, none of which were taller than three stories.

We entered town on what appeared to be the widest of the business streets. Its curbsides were populated with gas stations, fast food restaurants, and a small strip shopping center. The only business which I was surprised to see was a place called Randy Andy's, which appeared to be a small strip club. Although it was only mid-afternoon, there were half a dozen cars and pickup trucks parked in front of the place. I hadn't expected to see a strip club in a small town in the middle of the Bible Belt.

We proceeded on down the main drag. Ovid was a typical small town with diagonal parking in front of the stores and a few of the local residents strolling casually in front of the shops. At first glance, it appeared to be the main street of a small farming community, populated by the usual casual folks you would expect to see in any small town from coast-to-coast. But it was here on the main street (which I later learned was actually called 'Main Street') that I first noticed something odd about Ovid.

The first odd thing I noticed—the first of many odd things about Ovid I was to notice as time passed—was the people. They seemed normal enough, but it was as if they were extras in a movie. They seemed somehow to be acting their parts rather than being real small-town folks. They went through all the motions, but they did so in a

somewhat stilted manner. And they seemed somehow... transparent. I couldn't exactly see through them, but it was as if they weren't really there. I passed it off as travel fatigue.

We turned off the main street about halfway through the business district. A block west of Main Street, we came upon a gray granite building with Doric columns in front. The words 'City Hall' were carved into the granite above the columns. As small town city halls went, it was reasonably impressive, but except for the Oklahoma flag flying next to the US flag in the grassy area in front of the building, it could have been the city hall of almost any small town in America.

"Pull in that driveway," Officer Mercer told Randy. Randy followed the police cruiser into the driveway which bore a sign which said 'Police Business Only.' We parked next to the police car and got out of the Trans-Am.

The other officer was opening the back door of the cruiser, motioning for Steve and Carl to get out. I was relieved to see they were behaving themselves. With those two, you just never knew. They were, however, a little unsteady on their feet. The effects of the alcohol were still apparent, and I was certain that the other officer had smelled the liquor on their breath.

"I got a bad feeling about this," Randy muttered to me.

"Me too," I muttered back. "Let's just hope they agree to a fine and let us go."

"You don't think they'll put us in jail?" Randy asked, suddenly becoming even more worried.

"I don't know," I said truthfully. Then, I asked Randy, "Do you notice how much these two cops look alike?"

Randy scowled the little 'what are you talking about?' scowl I had seen from him ever since our freshman year. "Matt, have you been hitting the bottle with Steve and Carl?"

I looked at him seriously. "Of course not. Are you saying you don't think they look alike?"

“Well of course they don’t look alike.”

I didn’t get a chance to continue the conversation, because Officer Mercer was suddenly at my side.

“Okay, boys,” Officer Mercer said. “It’s time to go see the Judge.”

Although our discussion had been interrupted, I continued to think about what Randy had said as we were led down a short corridor to a room with a brass nameplate declaring it to be ‘Court Room A.’ How could Randy have missed the similarity between the two officers? He was usually much more observant than I was. Yet he saw nothing unusual about the two officers. I shuddered suddenly. I had a bad feeling about Ovid, Oklahoma. I only hoped we would be fined and quickly sent on our way. I didn’t want to be in Ovid after the sun went down. I had seen too many horror movies.

I had also seen *The Dukes of Hazard*, and I will admit that I expected something out of that for a courtroom (and Judge). I was wrong, though. The courtroom was well appointed, with fairly new walnut wainscoting and matching furniture. The Judge’s bench had a crest in gold in the center. I couldn’t quite make out the picture on it, but it appeared to be a bird of some sort. Whatever the bird was, it did not look familiar.

“All rise,” Officer Mercer intoned needlessly, as we were all standing at the defendant’s table already. The door to the Judge’s chambers opened and the Judge appeared.

The Judge was also different from what I had imagined. Instead of the tobacco-chewing good ol’ boy I had expected, he was middle aged—perhaps mid-fifties—with dark hair that was fading to give promise of future graying. He had a neatly trimmed beard which was still dark but flecked with gray giving him a distinguished look. He wore gold-rimmed glasses which somehow made him look more scholarly. His black robe was impeccably neat and pressed to the point that it looked as if you could cut yourself on one of the pleats.

My only surprise was that we were the only people in the courtroom. Granted, I only wanted to be a lawyer at this point, so I really didn’t

know much about actual court procedure. Still, I thought it was customary to have a court stenographer there to transcribe the proceedings of the court. But, I thought, this was a small town, and they might be lax about such things. Then another thought crossed my mind. If there was no one in the courtroom to transcribe the proceedings, what was to stop Officer Mercer, who appeared to be acting as bailiff, and the Judge from fining Randy and pocketing the take? I knew there were such 'speed traps' scattered across the country.

"Is something wrong, son?" the Judge asked, and I suddenly realized he was asking the question of me.

"Huh?" I replied, embarrassed. "Oh, I was just wondering..."

"Where the court reporter was," he finished for me.

"Well, yes," I admitted. How had he known? It was if... as if he had read my mind.

Now, I grew up on old Twilight Zone reruns, and I could almost imagine Rod Serling standing in the corner of the courtroom ("Imagine, if you will, four college boys, on their way to the big game..."). It was one thing for a town to have two cops who looked enough alike to be twins, but add that to a town full of residents who appeared to be semi-transparent zombies and a Judge who finished sentences for you, I was ready to leave. I looked at Randy, Steve and Carl. They were all tense at the idea of being in court, but I could tell they had noticed nothing out of the ordinary.

"Well," the Judge began with a hint of a Southern drawl which I was later to realize was an Oklahoma twang, "we like to keep things informal down here. But I am planning to get a new court reporter in here real soon. In the meantime, we've just got to make do with what we've got. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Honor," I said respectfully. I supposed if things went badly, Randy could always get a lawyer and appeal any decision the Judge would make.

“Well, now,” the Judge said, looking down through gold rimmed glasses at the paperwork Officer Mercer had put in front of him, “it says here that you boys were speeding. Eighty-nine miles an hour in a fifty-five mile per hour zone. That sounds pretty fast to me.”

“Yes, sir,” Randy said respectfully.

“Lots of folks get killed doing that kind of speed around here,” the Judge said, his eyes burning into Randy. “You’re just lucky our police officers caught you before you got hurt. Or hurt somebody else.”

He stopped for a moment, looking at Steve and Carl. “You boys been drinking?”

Steve and Carl both turned pale and said nothing.

“You might as well admit it,” the Judge said at last. “I can smell it up here. Now how much have you boys had to drink?”

“Just a few,” Steve managed to say nervously.

“Yeah, just a few,” Carl echoed unconvincingly.

“Well,” the Judge said, casting a harsh gaze at both of them, “it smells like you’ve had more than a few. You boys are too old for that sort of behavior. How about you other two? Have you been drinking?”

“Not today, no sir,” I managed to say and saw Randy nod his head in agreement.

“Well, then you’re the smart ones,” he said. “I’ll keep that in mind. Now, though, it’s time for your sentence.”

Sentence? What was he talking about? There hadn’t even been a trial. I looked at my friends to gauge their reaction, but to my shock, they were calmly staring at the Judge as if nothing was wrong.

“Excuse me,” I ventured. “Your Honor, may I approach the bench?”

The Judge squinted at me. “You’re a little young to be a lawyer, son.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied in agreement. “But I plan to be one someday.”

“Well,” the Judge drawled thoughtfully, “given that you have an interest in the law, and given that we like to keep things informal here

as I've mentioned, go ahead and approach the bench."

I looked at my friends. Their calm stares continued. I was on my own here. Slowly, I walked forward to face the Judge. "Your Honor," I began, "I don't know that much about the law, but shouldn't you ask how we plead and then hear evidence?"

The Judge stared at me as if sizing me up. "So you don't think this is proper courtroom procedure?"

"Uh, no, sir. I'm sorry, but I don't."

To my great surprise, he smiled. "It sounds as if I need someone like you around here to help me out. I wouldn't want to be guilty of improper courtroom procedure."

The irony was lost on me. "I just thought, Your Honor, that..."

His gavel came down suddenly causing me to jump. "That's enough, son. You were speeding and that's all there is to it. Now step back so I can pronounce sentence."

I obeyed at once. There was nothing further to be gained by arguing with him.

Suddenly, the Judge stood up. He raised his hands over his head like a television evangelist and closed his eyes. I was so surprised, I didn't know what to do. This didn't seem to be standard court procedure. I looked over at Officer Mercer. He was watching the proceedings as if nothing were wrong. Then I looked at Randy, Steve, and Carl. Each of them stood rigidly, their eyes staring blindly forward as if they were in a trance. What was going on here?

The Judge began speaking in a language I had never heard before. Then the courtroom actually darkened slightly, and I felt a soft breeze flow through the room. My body gave an involuntary shiver, as if I had experienced something frightening. I thought I could hear voices whispering to me on the breeze. Then, as quickly as it had begun, the breeze stopped and the lights returned to normal. There was a sudden crack of wood striking wood, and I realized at once that the Judge had resumed his seat and rapped his gavel. "Court is adjourned!" I heard

him say.

“What?” I asked as the Judge rose and left the courtroom. As I looked around, everything seemed to have returned to normal.

Randy was all smiles. “Hey, man, do you believe it?”

“Believe what?” I asked.

“Matt, weren’t you paying any attention?” Randy asked. “He let us go with a warning.”

I looked in Randy’s innocent eyes with astonishment. He wasn’t pulling my leg. He really didn’t remember a thing that had happened in the courtroom. “Explain that to me,” I said, attempting to clarify what he believed.

“Bullshit!” Steve interjected suddenly, his old exuberance returning.

“We can talk about it later. I’m hungry.”

“Yeah,” Carl chimed in. “Let’s get outta this place. It gives me the creeps.”

It gave me the creeps, too, but I suspected for a different reason. Carl was creeped out by the fact that our little weekend party was almost ruined by a small town cop and Judge. I was creeped out because there was something weird going on and I seemed to be the only one to notice.

“The guys are right,” Randy told me. “Let’s get out of here. We’ll find someplace on the edge of town to grab a burger and then drive late tonight. We can be in Austin by afternoon if we get going now.”

I was outvoted, I realized. But maybe they were right, I thought. I had just watched a Judge do his Druid act, but no one else seemed to notice. Why not just ignore it and head out of town as quickly as possible. I certainly didn’t want to spend one more minute in Ovid.

Officer Mercer even seemed to agree. “Come on, boys,” he said to us. “I’ll walk you back to your car. You can be on the road in no time.”

We walked back to the parking lot as I silently tried to convince myself that nothing was really out of sorts. Just when I was starting to think

that I was just imagining things, I got my next shock. Randy's car was missing! I turned to enlist Officer Mercer's help when Randy called, "Are you coming or not, Matt?"

I looked around at Randy and the other guys. They were piling into a car, but it wasn't Randy's red Trans-Am. Instead, it was a fairly new dark green Taurus station wagon. Now, I had known Randy for a long time, and I knew he would never have a Taurus wagon. He'd die first.

"Are you okay?" Randy called.

"Not really," I muttered, but only Officer Mercer could hear me.

"Don't worry," he told me. "It's not as bad as you think."

"What?" I asked, as puzzled as ever.

Ignoring my question, he opened the front passenger door of the wagon for me and gently herded me in. "You drive carefully now. I'll see you later."

Later? I didn't plan to see him ever again, but once more, I was the only one to notice. I decided it wasn't worth discussing.

"You kids buckle up now, okay?" This was from Randy. What was he talking about? But I heard the distinct click of seat belts in the back seat. It wasn't like Carl and Steve to take the admonition without comment. But rather than their usual crude comments, all I heard from the back seat was soft, childish giggling.

"Randy, what the hell is going on?" I asked as he started the engine and pulled out of the municipal parking lot.

"What do you mean... Matt?" he said, almost as if he was having trouble remembering my name. There was a distant look on his face.

"I mean where is your Trans-Am? And do you mean to tell me you didn't see the Judge's little high priest imitation?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Randy said, shaking his head. As his head turned slightly toward me, I saw his upper lip had the beginnings of a moustache. Randy had never had a moustache before. In fact, he had never liked them, even convincing me to shave

off the one I had grown during our junior year.

"I'm hungry!" Steve yelled again, but there was something not quite right about the way he said it. He sounded almost petulant.

"Me, too!" Carl yelled, equally petulant.

"Okay now," Randy said in a soothing voice. "Don't worry. Rusty's Burger Barn is just up the road. We all like Rusty's, don't we?"

"You bet!" came two voices from the back seat.

I started to ask Randy how he knew there was a place called Rusty's Burger Barn and how he knew its location, but I was sure I wouldn't get a meaningful response. I was starting to think I was the only person in the car who hadn't lost his wits. It was as if they had all been in a trance since we left the courtroom.

Suddenly, I hear more giggling in the back seat. There was something wrong back there. I turned around sharply and got yet another shock. Carl and Steve were both smaller, younger looking. They each appeared to be about fifteen or so, and their jeans had been replaced by blue shorts. In addition, Carl's face actually looked somehow softer than it had before. Both of them had childish grins on their faces, and neither of them acted as if there was anything even remotely wrong. What the hell was happening to them?

Then, with a sudden chill, I realized if something was happening to them, it was probably happening to me as well. With trepidation, I pulled down the visor. The vanity mirror was lighted, so I could see myself clearly. Whereas Steve and Carl looked younger, I looked somehow more mature, and my brown hair was now a dark blonde and growing longer as I watched it.

"Jerry, stop the car!" I exclaimed. Jerry? Who the hell was Jerry? But Randy did stop the car.

"What's wrong, hon?" he asked.

Oh my God, I thought. Somehow, I knew what was happening to us. Not the specifics, but I knew we were changing, and if I had to guess, we were changing from four college students into the stereotypical

American family. That meant Randy was dad, Steve and Carl were the kids, and I was...

"We've got to go back to the city hall. I have to see the Judge," I told him in a voice that suddenly didn't seem quite right. It was as if my voice had been shifted half an octave higher.

"What did you forget?" Randy asked with irritation in his voice.

"Just turn around!" I pleaded. Yes, my voice definitely didn't sound right. It was pitching itself higher and higher. It was a full octave higher now and there was a soft Oklahoma twang in it. I could feel an odd tingling sensation spreading throughout my body.

"Okay," Randy said, "but I don't know why you can't wait 'til tomorrow." There was a soft twang in his voice, too.

As we drove back to the municipal complex, I began to fear that we wouldn't be in time. I watched in silent horror as my body seemed to ripple under my clothes. I fought back with all my conscious will, but I knew instinctively that I wouldn't be able to hold off the changes forever.

It took only a few minutes to return to the municipal complex, but I saw with concern that there were no lights in the area that housed the courtrooms. The only lights were from the police offices in another wing. I thought about demanding to see the police, but something told me that wouldn't do any good. Only the Judge had the power to stop what I feared was happening, and he was nowhere to be seen. Still, in desperation, I sprinted from the car and rattled to door to the court wing, but to no avail.

Randy joined me on the steps, and to my horror, put an arm around me. "Don't worry, sugar," he said. "Whatever you forgot, you can get when you go to work tomorrow."

I actually jumped a little when Randy put his arm around me. I knew what was happening to me. My hair was longer, touching my shoulders now, and my voice was higher, and I noticed I was perhaps four inches shorter than Randy. He and I had been the same height

before the changes started. And other things about my body would be changing shortly, I knew. I don't know what bothered me more, the fact that my best friend had put an arm around me as if I were a girl who needed to be comforted, or the fact that it actually felt pretty good. I was becoming very confused.

I actually began to cry softly to myself. I don't even think Randy noticed. Even if he had, he wouldn't have understood what I was crying about. Everything seemed normal to him. Steve and Carl didn't see anything unusual either. They sat quietly in the back seat of the Taurus wagon like the good little children I knew they were becoming. Each looked to be about eleven or twelve now, and Carl was starting to look quite feminine with a softer face and dark blonde hair perhaps five inches long. Their clothing had changed almost completely to reflect their new status as children. In addition to their blue shorts, each wore brown sandals and matching Six Flags Over Texas T-shirts.

I had let Randy lead me back to the car, knowing that in his mind, he was leading his wife back to her seat at his side. That's what I was becoming, I realized. I could already feel indications of what was about to happen. I could feel my hair getting longer. I had never liked long hair, so its feel was unusual to me. Also, I was starting to feel my skin moving around, particularly around my nipples and my groin. There was nothing definite happening yet, but I was bracing myself for the changes I knew were about to occur.

As I stepped back into the car, I unconsciously slid in as demurely as any girl I had ever seen. It seemed even I was to be affected somewhat mentally by the spell as well. But it wasn't just mental, I knew. I had worn jeans that day, in spite of the surprising heat of the day. But now, I was wearing denim shorts that were much shorter than any I would have normally worn. Also, I was wearing sandals, I could see, with a small heel on them unlike anything a man would wear.

As we drove away from the municipal building, I heard soft giggling in the back seat, rising in octave each block we travelled. I looked at Randy. He had changed the least of any of us, I knew. He was a little

taller and a little broader through the shoulders, as if he had once played football. He was handsome (where had that thought come from?) and appeared to be about twenty-five. The moustache he had suddenly grown had filled out, and I couldn't help but think it looked a little... sexy? No! Yes. No.

I looked down at myself. My bare legs were now hairless, and my feet had been reduced in size. To add to my humiliation, I could see through the straps of the sandals that my toenails were now a frosted pink. I looked in fear at my fingernails, suspecting what I would find. And yes, they were the same frosted pink color now, and filed to a feminine point nearly half an inch beyond the tips of my now-slender fingers.

These changes were nothing, though, compared to the changes which were occurring over the rest of my body. I felt an odd twitching in my crotch and abdomen. It was as if my internal organs were being rearranged. I had little doubt that ovaries and a womb would be there in no time. As if to confirm that thought, I felt my testicles shrink and retract into my body. I gave a small gasp as I felt a sudden void between my legs as my penis shrank to nearly nothing. . I knew I now had a feminine slit between my legs. The slit actually moistened slightly at the thought.

On my chest, breasts were beginning to develop and began poking up into the soft white cotton top which clung to me like a second skin. My hair was continuing to get longer, and I could feel its weight on my head. There was a sudden pinprick at the lobe of each ear, and then I felt the small weight of earrings. I reached up to touch one, realizing as I touched it with my long frosted pink fingernail that it was a loop about an inch in diameter.

"Cindy, you got any money in your purse?"

So that was to be my name. It wasn't a bad name, I supposed. I looked down near my feet and saw a purse. There was nothing I could do but play the role, at least until I saw the Judge again. If I suddenly started claiming I was a guy, I would find myself on a one-way trip to Ovid's version of the funny farm. I looked in the purse and pulled out a

wallet. There were two twenties in it. "It looks like forty dollars," I said in a voice that was now firmly alto.

"That should be enough," Randy said. "I don't want to put it on a credit card."

I felt something trying to get into my mind. It was as if there were a thousand voices whispering at me. Instinctively (woman's intuition?), I knew the voices were trying to change my mind as they had changed my body. They would make me believe that I was Cindy, just as they had made Randy, Steve, and Carl believe they were not themselves. I tried to shut the voices out, and for the most part, I knew I had succeeded. I was still Matt O'Hara, regardless of what my body looked like.

I finally dared to look in the back seat, feeling the sweep of long hair as I turned. There, where Carl and Steve had been minutes before, were two young children, each about six years old. They appeared to be twins with dark blonde hair similar to my own, each dressed in white T-shirts, dark blue shorts, and sandals. But I knew they were fraternal twins, not identical, since Steve was now a young boy and Carl was obviously a young girl.

"Are we almost there, Mommy?" the girl Carl now was asked in a sweet, innocent voice.

What could I do but answer... her? "Almost, sweetheart."

I don't know where the 'sweetheart' came from. Apparently, I wasn't completely successful in keeping out the information the small voices had tried to whisper to me. I felt an odd link to the children, which I recognized as what is commonly called 'maternal instinct.' I didn't even know their names, but I knew they were mine.

"Mike, are you gonna get a Rusty Burger?" Randy asked, settling into his new role as the children's father. Randy, now Jerry, I realized, was dressed like us, in shorts, T-shirt, and sandals. He was a good-looking guy, I realized, unable to shut the thought out of my mind. I felt as if I were suddenly gay even though I realized that the new plumbing between my legs made my thought about Jerry's looks completely

heterosexual.

“You bet, Dad,” Steve, now Mike, replied.

“Me, too,” the little girl said.

“I don’t know, Michelle,” Randy said slowly. “You don’t seem to be able to eat as much as Mike. That’s how your mom and I will be able to tell you apart when you’re older. Mike will be the fat one and you’ll be the skinny one.”

Carl, now Michelle, giggled so girlishly that I nearly shuddered.

I almost envied the three of them. They thought they had always been the people they were now. Only I seemed to remember who I really was. But I knew that wouldn’t do me any good. Until I could find the Judge, I would have to be Cindy Whoever, wife and mother, or I would probably find myself on the receiving end of whatever passed for psychiatric care in Ovid, Oklahoma.

We pulled up at a brightly-lit building with a large smiling neon bull under which in neon was written ‘Rusty’s Best Burgers.’ I got out of the car, trying to play my role, but feeling like a man in unwilling drag. As I shut the door, Randy called, “Honey, you forgot your purse.”

Well, that was my first mistake. I wasn’t used to carrying a purse. I wondered for a few seconds why women didn’t carry wallets like men, but the feeling of denim tight against my now-prominent ass told me why. I grabbed the purse and slung the strap over one of my newly-narrowed shoulders, embarrassed at the feminine look it must have given me.

The children Steve and Carl had become piled out of the back seat as if there was nothing out of the ordinary. “Mom?” the girl who had been Carl asked, sending a weird chill up my spine with the realization that in this warped reality, I was her mother. “Can I have a sundae?”

“We’ll see,” I said in the best motherly tone I could muster. I have to play the role, I told myself.

As we walked into the restaurant, I felt for the first time the sway of large breasts and ample hips. It was the strangest, most alien feeling I

had ever experienced. I could feel Randy, or rather the man he had become, taking my body in with his eyes. I imagined I was quite a sexy sight, with my long bare legs and short denim shorts. I halfway expected him to ravish me in the parking lot, but he stopped short by slipping his arm around my newly narrow waist while the children skipped ahead of us, oblivious to both what had happened to them and the attentions their 'father' was giving their 'mother.'

Once inside the restaurant, I felt a new surge of embarrassment as every male eye in the place turned to look at me. Again, I felt as if I were in drag. But I knew there was nothing unfeminine about me. I hadn't seen my face yet, but I could taste the lipstick which had suddenly appeared there, and I was sure my face matched the rest of my body. Every man in the place saw an attractive young woman.

I quickly rushed the kids to a booth, taking Michelle on my side while Mike and Jerry sat across from us. I nearly shuddered upon realizing how glibly their new names had come to me.

"Hi, Jerry, Cindy," a perky young waitress greeted us. She was perhaps eighteen, brunette, and quite attractive. Again, I realized I could almost see through her.

"Hi, Maxine," Randy, or rather, Jerry said nonchalantly. I just smiled and hoped it looked friendly. "I think it's gonna be Rusty Burgers all around, except Michelle will have a Rusty Junior."

"Aw, dad!" My new daughter whined.

"Don't worry," I said in my best soothing mother's voice, "you can have some of mine if you're still hungry." God knew I wasn't going to be very hungry. The thought of what I had become was enough to ruin my appetite.

"Cheese?"

"Sure. On all of them," Jerry said without asking. I was a little incensed. I was used to ordering my own food.

"How about drinks?"

"Choc malt," both kids said at once.

“I’ll take a vanilla malt,” Jerry said. Then, to me. “Your usual, hon?”

“Sure,” I said noncommittally. Whatever my usual was, I supposed this body would like it.

“A Diet Coke for Cindy,” he said.

Diet Coke?

If I was going to drink Coke, I never drank Diet Coke. Still, I reasoned, this female body had borne two children. It wouldn’t be a good idea to let it get fat. If, perish the thought, I was stuck in it for the rest of my life, I certainly didn’t want to be a fat chick. While I could see that my body was well proportioned, I wasn’t exactly model slim even at that.

“I’ve got to go to the restroom,” I announced at once. I didn’t really need to, but I wanted to get a better view of what I had become. Also, I didn’t want to have to keep up my end of the conversation with my ‘family.’ They seemed to be comfortable with their new situation, but I was not.

“Me, too, mom!” my ‘daughter’ declared. It seemed as if going to the restroom in packs was normal, even for girls as young as—what—six?

“Okay,” I sighed, resigned to having to play the new role even in the restroom. Together, we marched off to the restroom.

“Where are you going, mom?”

Thank god she had gone with me. I nearly blundered into the men’s room. “Sorry, honey. I just made a wrong turn.”

“Are you okay, mom?”

Was I okay? I couldn’t say for sure. “Yeah, I’m fine,” I lied.

My first impression of the women’s restroom was how much cleaner it was than the typical men’s room. Well, I didn’t object. If I had to use one, I wanted everything to be clean since I could no longer stand to do my business. As long as I remained a woman, I wanted to be able to sit down on a clean toilet seat. I realized with a pang of sadness that I was going to miss the ability to piss standing up. You never realize how much the little things mean until something comes along

to take them away.

Michelle marched nonchalantly into one of the stalls, and I could see her shorts fall around her ankles as she sat down, her short legs causing her feet to rise up off the floor. I was beginning to think of her as being Michelle now. It was not part of the spell, I realized. It was simply too difficult to think of that darling little girl having ever been a male twenty-one year old.

Darling? I thought. I had never used that word in that context in my entire life. I supposed I would now start saying things like “Isn’t that precious?” and “He’s so sweet.” How could I survive this experience without dying of embarrassment?

While Michelle was in the stall, I used the time to quickly examine myself in the mirror. I was, I guessed, about five-four or five-five. My hair was a fairly dark blonde, slightly curled, falling naturally over my narrowed shoulders. My face was cute, for lack of a better word. I wouldn’t win the Miss America Pageant with it, but it was certainly attractive. It looked a little like Meg Ryan’s face, I thought, but perhaps I was just being generous with myself.

My new breasts seemed enormous to me. I couldn’t tell for sure, but I guessed them to be about a 36C. Later, when I confirmed this size by examining the label in the bra, I took no joy in being right. My hips were wide, about a 38, I thought (again, I later was proven correct). My waist was a little disappointing. It wasn’t as narrow as I thought it should be. While it wasn’t bad, it had probably spread a little with the birth of twins. Don’t get me wrong—I was an attractive woman, but I was the type of woman who would have to watch her weight if she was going to stay attractive. I resolved next time to order a salad instead of a Rusty Burger.

All in all, I was attractive. I wasn’t model or TV star attractive, but I would probably turn a few male heads in a shopping center parking lot, particularly if I were wearing the tight T-shirt and shorts combination I now had on. If I were still my male self, I would be interested in this woman.

Damn it, I suddenly thought. I should have brought the purse into the women's room. Then I could have found out who I was besides just Cindy. If I stayed in this body long, I would have to develop the habit of carrying it with me. Men had it easier. All I had to do as a man was stuff a wallet in my rear pocket. But I realized sadly once more that my new ass was far too large to allow me to stick a wallet in the tiny pocket which rested there.

"Ready, mom?" Michelle asked. I hadn't noticed she had finished.

"I guess so," I sighed. I was as ready as I could be.

The meal was relatively uneventful. It reminded me of many a meal I had enjoyed with my family when I was younger. Mike and Michelle were fairly well behaved and offered up only an occasional barbed comment to his or her sibling. Ironically, as Mike and Michelle, they seemed better behaved than they had as Steve and Carl. At least some good had come from the transformation.

Jerry, as Randy had now become, was not too unlike Randy. He was a little on the quiet side but polite and calm. I found myself comfortable around his new persona, at least as long as he didn't call me 'honey' or 'sweetheart.'

The Rusty Burger was actually pretty good, but I found I wasn't able to eat the entire thing. Part of the reason for my lack of appetite was, I was my newly diminished size, but a larger part, I realized, was my desire to not become Cindy the Human Blimp. I left nearly half of my sandwich and all of my fries.

After we had finished, the kids and Jerry ordered ice cream cones, but I demurred. As much as I liked ice cream, I knew I couldn't afford the calories. I began to suspect that my shorts were a little tight not just to be sexy but because I needed to lose a pound or two as well.

Everyone seemed to be having a good time except me. I thought I saw an occasional look of panic on Mike's face a time or two, but it quickly faded away into the face of the happy six year old boy he had become. Michelle daintily licked at her cone as if she had been a girl all her life. As Carl, I had seen him—her—eat like a pig, stuffing half an

ice cream cone down at one gulp. Now, as a young girl, she was as careful about how she ate as a devotee of Emily Post. Jerry, my new 'husband' ate in manly silence, watching his little family enjoy their treats much as a proud wolf watching his pack.

I tried to look happy as well. It would have served no purpose for me to act out of character. If I were suddenly to yell, "What is wrong with all of you? Can't you see we're not ourselves? I'm supposed to be a man!" I would be locked up within the hour. I had to play my role as best I could until I could see the Judge in the morning.

When my 'family' had finished eating the ice cream cones, we went back to the car. The other three were laughing and talking. For them, it was a perfect ending to another day. I smiled and played my part as best I could, but I felt as if I were miscast in some bizarre play as I walked back to the car. At least it was a relief not to be in public anymore. Every male over the age of puberty who walked into Rusty's as we ate took a moment to look at my breasts. I felt as if I had been put on display.

The ride 'home' was uneventful. We had turned away from the brightly-lit business streets of the town and down a quiet residential street, flanked by large oak trees and stately houses. Soon, though, we were past the big houses to an area where the trees were smaller and the houses were newer but more modest. We seemed to be in Ovid's smaller version of a subdivision, the happy home for middle class Americans everywhere.

We pulled into the driveway of an attractive two-story house with a well-manicured lawn. The garage door rose automatically and we pulled into a two-stall garage. A dark blue Ford Ranger truck was parked on the other side of the garage. Great, I thought. My choices for driving would be a soccer-mom station wagon or a redneck pickup. How small town could we be?

The kids bolted for what looked like the den, and it wasn't long before I heard the sounds of a television spewing the cheap music and bad acting of some cartoon show. It was probably the Cartoon Network, I thought. Well, at least we had cable. Great, I could watch Lifetime, the

women's channel.

"Hey, kids," Jerry (for I was now thinking of him as 'Jerry') called, "you guys get ready for bed. Tomorrow's a school day."

"Aw!" two voices chorused.

"Now!" he said sternly.

"Okay," came the chorused reply.

He turned to me. "What's wrong, hon?"

I suddenly realized I was just standing there by the entrance to the garage. This was supposed to be my house. I was Cindy Whatever and this was my home and this was my family. My problem was that none of it was real, or at least none of it felt real. I just didn't know what to do.

"Cindy?"

"I'm okay, Jerry," I managed to say.

"You don't look okay. Your parents are fine. That was the reason we went out to their farm today, wasn't it?"

Was it? That explained why the family was on an outing on a school/work day. In this reality, my parents apparently lived on a farm and I must have been worried about them, so we had taken the day to go see them. Or at least, we had taken the afternoon. I tried to visualize my parents, but all I could see were the parents Matt O'Hara had left behind in Pennsylvania at the beginning of the school term.

"Yes," I said mechanically. "They're fine."

Jerry looked a little uncertain, but he let it drop.

Fortunately, the 'kids' knew the routine for getting ready for bed and did so with a minimum of fuss. I was duly thankful of this, for I had no idea what I would need to do to get them ready. By eight thirty, they were in their pajamas and off to bed in their separate rooms. It was with a sigh of relief that I turned off the lights in their rooms.

Jerry was waiting for me in the den. We hadn't spoken since I had

gotten the kids ready for bed. I saw with trepidation that his look of concern was back.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

“I feel fine,” I lied. I just wanted to get off to bed and forget this whole experience. With any luck at all, I would wake up in the morning to find this had all been a long nightmare, the result of a hard night of drinking in Kansas City. It would be Thursday morning again, and I would navigate Randy around the entire state of Oklahoma. I wanted to be as far away from Ovid as possible.

Jerry rose from his chair and, to my alarm, slipped his arms around my waist, pressing me to his chest. I felt the not exactly unpleasant sensation of having my new boobs pressed against his chest. Then I felt with alarm something growing in his groin, pressing against my abdomen. Good god, he was getting a hard-on over me!

“You need to relax,” he said, his voice soothing.

Oh, I did need to relax, I thought, but not the way he had in mind. I had been on the other side of this scene enough times to know where this was leading. No amount of soothing talk was going to get me on my back with my legs spread wide.

But my new body had other ideas. Those nipples flattened against his chest were trying to get hard, and there was a feeling of pain mixed with pleasure coursing through them. Down south, I could feel my new vagina starting to moisten, and there was a tingling sensation in about the spot I suspected my clitoris lay.

“Jerry,” I began, surprised at how throaty my voice had suddenly become, “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“It isn’t,” he agreed, bending to kiss me on the neck. “It’s a great idea.”

I could feel my heart beating faster. In my mind, I was a normal, heterosexual male with all the normal drives. I still found women attractive, at least on an intellectual level. The last thing in the world my male mind wanted was to have a man kissing my body. But my

male mind was now attached to a very female body, and as repugnant as the thought of making love was to Matt, Cindy was beginning to respond.

Involuntarily, my own hands came up to grip Jerry's ass. It was rock hard, unlike the soft female asses I was used to holding. And instead of my large male hands, I was gripping Jerry's ass with small, delicate hands crowned with long, feminine nails. As if to contrast the feeling I was experiencing, I felt Jerry's large, strong hands grip my own fleshy ass, and I felt a little shudder of pleasure.

There was still time for my male mind to assert itself, I realized. All I had to do was say 'no.' Just say no, I thought. Just say it...

But before I could say it, my lips were covered by his. I felt his tongue pressing past my lips and into my own mouth. The time to say no had passed. I had begun to feel dizzy as my breathing became more rapid. No matter what my mind wanted, my body wanted something different.

With almost no effort, I was able to shift my mind into neutral. I felt everything normally, and even reacted as a normal woman would react, but I no longer reasoned in the usual sense of the word. Cindy was now in full control, only I was Cindy.

Still holding on to each other, we strolled into our darkened bedroom. Then, with a hunger too intense to describe, we pulled at each other's clothing until we were sprawled out nude across the bed.

My body was on fire, anxious for the touch of my man. Our hands moved over each other's body's in a random frenzy. Then, suddenly, Jerry's hand rested between my legs, and for the first time in my life, I learned what it really meant to have a clitoris. I returned the favor, grasping his penis without thinking.

In moments, he was inside me, sending tiny surges of pleasure through my entire groin. My male mind tried to resurface and stop the action, but my female body held any rational thoughts back. Then, without warning, there was a surge of intense pleasure which seemed to wash through my entire body. This was followed by a sudden moan

from Jerry, and I felt something warm and wet coursing into my body...

I awakened about half an hour later, disoriented and shocked to find my body both naked and female, held in place by a large, hairy arm. Then, it all flooded back into my mind. I was someone named Cindy, mother of two, wife of Jerry and... And that was about all I knew. Wasn't I something? I didn't even know who I was, and yet I had just slept with a man. Slept? We did a lot more than sleep, I realized.

I carefully moved Jerry's arm away without waking him, got up, and went to the bathroom. Turning on the light, I saw I was no worse for the wear of the evening. My hair was a mess and my crotch looked a little sticky, but other than that, I was about normal, if being a woman after twenty-one years of being male could be considered normal.

I washed myself off, paying special attention to the sticky substance. My god, I realized, I had just had sex with a man. I could get pregnant. Apparently this Cindy had done so twice before. What could I do?

Then, I spied a little silver container, circular in shape. I had seen this type of container before. Sure enough, I thought as I opened the case. It contained birth control pills in little slots labelled with the days of the week. It was Thursday, so I looked at the slot for that day. There was no pill in the slot, I realized with relief.

When I got back into the bedroom, I saw Jerry had gotten up, put on some pajamas and gone back to bed without cleaning up. Just like a man, I found myself thinking. What an odd thought, I mused. After all, I was a man, or at least I had been. Yet I knew what to do as a woman after sex, almost as if everything I needed to know was buried somewhere in my mind. As if to prove this point, I realized I had absently gone over to 'my' dresser, pulled out a short nightie, and slipped it over my head without giving it a second thought. It was like an autonomic response, like breathing in and out.

I slipped gracefully into bed. Thank god it was a king size. The way Jerry was sprawled out, my small body wouldn't have had a chance in a standard bed.

I lay there thinking about what had happened the last few hours. The day had started normally enough, but from the moment we had approached Ovid, my life had changed radically. Ovid. Where had I heard that name before? He was an ancient poet, I realized, either Greek or Roman, I couldn't recall which. I remembered a history teacher way back in high school talking about him. Yes, he was Roman, and he had written... the Odyssey? No, that was Homer. Let me see... right, love poems and something else. What was it?

Then I remembered. It was called *Metamorphosis*, or something like that, and it dealt with stories of transformation from Greek and Roman myths. Had there been a sex change in it? I didn't really know. My reading tastes revolved around the techno-thrillers such as Tom Clancy. I resolved to read it sometime since I now could be an entire chapter in the book. Apparently someone in this little spot of Oklahoma (or was it the Twilight Zone?) had a sense of humor.

Okay, so what was to be done? I thought before sleep claimed me. I needed to get back first thing Friday and see the Judge. He was obviously the key to all of this. I would try to get him to change me back into my normal male self and my friends back as well. At least, the rest of my 'family' thought everything was normal. They weren't going through what I was experiencing. But I began to realize the longer I was Cindy, the more I would begin to think like and become her. Already I had given in to the sexual needs of this female body, something that I would have never imagined only a few hours before. As sick as that made me feel in retrospect, it had seemed normal at the time. It was as if I were an airplane on autopilot. If I just let myself go, I could act like a normal woman. How long would it be before being female and a wife and mother felt absolutely normal even off autopilot? I had to act quickly, I thought, as I drifted off to sleep.

I awakened the next morning to the sound of water running in the shower. For a moment, I forgot what had happened to me and thought I was back at Notre Dame, getting ready for another day of classes. Then I realized not only did I not have my frequent morning hard-on, but that there was nothing between my legs, and the weight on my

chest and hips reminded me that I wasn't my usual self. I absently brushed a lock of hair out of my eyes and sat up, feeling the weight of my breasts shift. I bit my lip softly, tasting the lipstick which was there. It seemed as if every sensation was designed to remind me of my new identity.

I got up, feeling the odd sensation of my nightie on my thighs and headed for the toilet to relieve a most insistent urge to void. Sitting on the stool, I once again regretted the loss of being able to pee standing up. This was most inconvenient. On autopilot once more, I wiped myself and flushed.

I padded back into the bedroom where Jerry had just finished his shower. He was standing in front of me in the buff, and I was embarrassed to realize that I was admiring his body. He smiled and grabbed me by the waist, planting a big kiss on my lips.

"Too bad we've both got to go to work," he said.

Work? I worked? Where? Thank god we both worked though, I thought. Otherwise, it would be back to bed for more bang bang.

"I got the kids up already," he told me. "I'll get them fed while you shower. Then I'll take them to school but you'll have to pick them up from day care."

"Sure," I muttered, not having the foggiest idea where Jerry or I worked or where the kids went to school or day care. How was I going to fake my way through an entire day? I still hadn't looked in my wallet to see what my last name was.

He gave me another kiss. "You'd better get your shower or you'll be late," he admonished me.

"Okay," I agreed.

Where to start? I had no idea what to wear, or for that matter, even where my clothes were. The only women I ever lived around were my mother and younger sister, but I never paid a lot of attention to what they did since I was a kid and that was 'girl stuff.' Perhaps if I had been married I might have a clue, but I was at a total loss.

I knew enough to recognize which dresser was mine from the array of cosmetics arranged on its top. Then I remembered that I had managed to find a nightie there the night before without knowing where to look. That had been in the dark, too. I tried to reach the same mental state I had been in then (minus the sex, of course). On autopilot again to my relief, I went directly to the right drawer and pulled out a tan bra and matching panties. Okay, I was on a roll...

Jerry was downstairs fixing cereal for the kids, so I didn't have to worry about stripping in front of him for my shower. I imagined that seeing me in the nude might lead to complications.

I had been tired and confused the previous night, and we had made love in the dark, so this was my first time to really examine my new body closely. It was certainly an attractive body with large but firm breasts with alert pink nipples and areolae. My hips were, I thought, a little wider than I would have liked, and my waist was showing signs of being not as narrow as I would have hoped. Probably the result of birthing twins, I thought. My legs were terrific, though, long and well shaped with well-defined ankles. I would look great in heels, I realized with some discomfort.

Before stepping into the shower, I took a moment to examine my face again since I hadn't had much time to look at it at Rusty's. It was a pretty face, but again, not beautiful. I could have been a cheerleader in school, but I would have fallen way short of being a movie star. Or maybe I could be in movies, I thought mischievously. I could dye my hair light blonde, wear a push up bra, and be lounging by the pool in some insipid B-movie. The thought was enough to almost make me laugh or cry, but I wasn't sure which.

My shower was sensuous without being provocative. I resisted with ease the temptation to rub myself all over like they do in the late night movies on cable. Maybe later, I thought. I had too many other things to worry about this morning. Finding the Judge was the most important order of the day.

But what was I going to say to him, I thought as I absently soaped my new body. Anyone who had the power of transformation was not

someone to cross. What could I say? Change me back or I'll... Or I'll what? Stomp my foot? Cry? No, I would have to appeal to his better nature, assuming he had one.

Perhaps the first question I should ask was why? Oh, sure, I had seen movies where the hero's sex was changed, but that was usually as a punishment for mistreating women. Had I done that? Not that I could remember. I was just your normal every day college guy, looking for your normal every day college co-ed. I had managed to get laid once in a while, but I never forced myself on anyone. So why me? If I had to be changed, why was I the mommy instead of the daddy?

Deep in thought, my autopilot had taken over again, and I found myself standing outside the shower, dry, with my bra and panties on while I rolled on deodorant. Well, at least the autopilot seemed to work well enough for me that I would look normal. I shuddered at the thought of putting on makeup all by myself.

Next, I had to decide on an outfit to wear. Where did I work and what sort of job did I do? Did I work someplace where casual attire was the order of the day, or did I have to get dressed in a skirt and heels? I decided on the latter since it would be more explainable to be overdressed than underdressed. Besides, a little voice inside me told me it was the natural thing to do. Between the autopilot and the little voice, I might just make it through this yet, I thought.

I selected a conservative white blouse, silky but not overtly frilly and feminine and a navy skirt and matching jacket. I needed heels, so I selected a pair of black ones with about an inch heel. No sense in getting on three-inch heels and falling over. Given the weight on my chest, that was a real possibility. Pantyhose proved no problem, as Cindy had a drawer full of them, mostly the same neutral taupe color.

I didn't even need any help to finish getting dressed. I had seen enough women put on pantyhose to know how to do it properly. Still, I began to realize why women shave their legs. Other than the obvious reason of appearance, even the slightest stubble would probably be enough to run the hose. Now I understood why you see so many pantyhose ads on TV. These wouldn't last more than a few wearings. I

had to admit, though, that they looked good on me. They were a perfect fit.

The blouse was a little difficult, since it buttoned up the back. Still, my arms proved to be quite limber, so I was able to get it buttoned without too much trouble. The skirt was even easier than pants. All you had to do was step into it. It seemed terribly short, but at three inches above the knee, it was stylish. Still, I felt terribly overexposed. However when in Rome (or Ovid as the case might be)... The jacket was tailored differently than a man's jacket, but it served the same function, so it proved no trouble at all.

Next came the makeup. I sighed in resignation and let the autopilot engage again. There was no sense in attempting this exercise without help, unless I wanted to try out for the circus. I watched with amazement as my hands deftly applied eye shadow, eye liner and mascara. I was astounded at the change it gave my eyes. They seemed bigger and deeper. They made me look more sophisticated.

Less time was spent applying a little blush and lipstick, but the finished product was a work of art. I looked good enough to eat. But I began to notice there was something missing... In a few moments, I realized I wasn't wearing any jewelry. No woman was fully dressed without the right accessories. I expertly picked out a conservative gold necklace, a gold bracelet, and two small gold hoops for my ears. Attaching them, I took another look at myself and decided I was ready to face the day.

"Bye, Mommy!" two young voices chorused, and my reverie was interrupted by two small children attached to my hips.

"Bye, kids," I managed to say, playing my role well, I thought.

"Later, hon," Jerry said, his arm around me as he planted a small kiss on my cheek. I guess he knew better than to screw up my makeup. "I'll see you at five."

Suddenly, I was alone. I began to realize how normal this entire morning had felt. I wondered suddenly if we were all just playing our roles. Perhaps Jerry knew he was really Randy, and Mike and Michelle knew they were really Steve and Carl. Maybe they were just

as frightened as I was and playing their parts until something could be done. I doubted it, though. They seemed too comfortable with the parts they were playing.

I went downstairs and made some toast (no butter—must lose weight) and poured a glass of juice. It was about seven thirty. The offices at city hall should be open at eight, I thought. That meant I would probably be late for work, wherever work was. Maybe my wallet would answer the question.

I broke it open and looked at my ID's. My full name was Cindy Mae Patton. Not a bad name, I thought. It could have been something long and hard to pronounce. Patton would do for now. I was twenty-five years old. Given the age of the twins, I must have had them right after high school. I wondered if I had had to get married. My height was listed as five four, so I had guessed almost right, and my weight was... well, let's just say that I vowed to lose five pounds in a hurry and ten pounds over time if I remained as Cindy.

There was nothing in the wallet to tell me where I worked. There were no company badges or insurance cards or business cards. After I finished at the city hall, I would have to go back on autopilot and drive myself to work.

I looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. It was a quarter until eight, so I figured I would be able to be in the Judge's office by eight. Ovid was a small enough town that I was sure I'd have no trouble the city hall again. All I had to do was backtrack until I reached the business district. It would be easy from there.

In the morning sun, Ovid appeared to be the pleasant small town of my youth. It was clean and bright, and showed the signs of small town prosperity. The only thing wrong with it was the people. Most of them still appeared almost transparent. I could see them, but I could also see right through them. But their actions appeared normal as they went about their business.

As expected, I had no trouble finding city hall. A police car was just pulling out, and the driver looked like Officer Mercer. I parked the

Taurus in the adjoining lot and walked nervously into city hall. I expected to have to give a lengthy explanation to someone, but the receptionist on duty (mostly transparent) just looked up at me and smiled. "Morning, Cindy. You guys have a fun day at your folks' farm?"

This was probably the most unexpected thing she could have said to me. "Uh, sure," I managed to say.

"Good, because the mayor has been looking for you already."

"The mayor?"

She frowned. "Cindy, are you okay, honey? You didn't get bad news at your folks' place, did you?"

"Huh? Oh, no. They're fine. Everything's fine." I almost added 'How are you?' in imitation of the Star Wars line, but I held myself back. "I'll check in with... the mayor right now," I promised, starting down the corridor to my right toward the courtrooms.

"Then don't you think you should go the right direction?" she asked.

"Oops," I said with a smile and changed direction, nearly losing my balance when my weight shifted in the heels.

I was met suddenly by a man in a suit. He was partially bald with a small moustache. He appeared to be about fifty or so and significantly overweight. Like the receptionist and most of the people I had seen in Ovid, he was somewhat transparent. "Oh, there you are, Cindy," he said. "I wanted to go over the speeding citations issued last week."

I didn't know what to say. I just stared at him. I had no idea what he was talking about.

When I didn't answer, he said, "Let's go down to the Judge's office. We can look at them there."

That was a great idea, I thought. He was going to take me right to the Judge. "Sure," I agreed, following him to an office near the end of the corridor.

I could tell as we stepped in the office that no one was there. The office suite consisted of an empty secretarial station which was

situated by the entrance to a larger, more opulent office, also deserted.

“Ah, here they are,” he said, lifting a report off the secretarial desk. As he leafed through the report, my eyes rested on the nameplate on the secretary’s desk. ‘Cindy Patton’ it read. Well, at least I didn’t have to figure out where I worked. I was there. This was the best break I could have hoped for, I realized. Now all I had to do was wait for the Judge to come to work.

“If you talk to the Judge today, tell him I’d like to go over this report with him,” the man said, heading for the door. “And tell him to enjoy his stay in Tulsa. I wish I could take a long weekend there.”

Tulsa? Long weekend? Oh no, I thought. That meant the Judge wouldn’t be back until Monday at the earliest. I was going to be stuck as a woman for the entire weekend. Well, at least I had access to the Judge’s office. Maybe I could learn what was going on.

If I was the Judge’s secretary, I assumed I would have full access to his office, and that seemed to be the case. Several people came into the outer office during the morning, and none of them seemed to give a second thought to the fact that I was systematically going through the Judge’s files.

At first, I found very little of interest. Most of the paperwork on and in his desk was the sort of thing you would expect on a municipal Judge’s desk. There were court briefs, recent rulings in other courts, and a number of professional journals. The only interesting aspect of his desk was the lack of personal paraphernalia. Everyone I’ve ever known had some personal items on his desk. Usually, it’s family pictures or coffee mugs that say ‘World’s Greatest Golfer,’ but in the Judge’s case, there was nothing. It was almost as if the Judge was as transparent in his own way as the other residents of Ovid.

The file that finally interested me was one tucked in the back of one of his desk drawers. It was a list of names with no explanation of its meaning. The list consisted of about five hundred names, one of the last of which was mine, or at least the name I now had. The rest of my

family appeared on that list as well. I decided to make a copy of it. I suspected that the list was the roster of people the Judge had created in Ovid. Again, no one questioned me as I made the copy.

Once I had gone through the Judge's desk, I decided it was time to go through my own desk. As I already pointed out, a good deal can be learned about a person by observing what is on or in their desk. There was the obligatory family picture, showing me in a nice off-white dress and Jerry in a stylish suit. The kids were dressed in their Sunday best, and we all looked happy and content. The only problem was we never posed for that picture.

There was another picture of me with an attractive older couple standing outside what appeared to be a well-kept farm house. The receptionist had said something about my folk's farm. My guess was that this couple was my nonexistent parents. Or were they nonexistent? Perhaps they really were out there on the farm, thinking about their daughter and her family. I shuddered. It was all too weird.

The side drawers of the desk were filled with files and forms which looked like the files and forms anyone would expect in an office, but the center drawer held more clues about me and my new life. There was a list of emergency phone numbers, one for my 'parents,' two for the kids (one for school and one for afterschool day-care), and one for Jerry.

I had to pick up the kids after school, so I decided I'd better find out where to go. I dialled the number.

"Northside Elementary," a voice answered.

"Yes," I began. "My family just moved to town." No lie there. "Could you tell me where your school is located?"

The directions were simple enough. I copied them down and then asked what time school was out. I was told three thirty. I did the same with the day care center, making sure that they picked up kids from Northside at three thirty. At least that situation was under control. All I would need to do after work was pick them up.

Next, I called Jerry.

“Duggan’s IGA,” a voice said.

“Yes, this is Cindy Patton. Is Jerry there?” I was a little tentative in my request. To be honest, I was surprised to learn that Jerry worked in a supermarket. I had seen several IGA stores on our trip, so I knew what they were. We seemed to live pretty well on a secretary’s salary and the earnings of a grocery clerk.

“Hey, hon,” Jerry’s voice came through, “I was just going to call you. Mr Duggan is coming in from Oklahoma City tonight. He wants to meet with me in the morning and then play a round of golf with Jack and I. Then, he’s going to take you, me, Jack and Sherry over to Winston’s for dinner. It sounds like it may mean a promotion to Store Manager. Jack’s in line to move up. Plan on meeting them about six tomorrow. Since the kids will be at church camp Saturday night, we won’t even need a sitter.”

“Gee, that’s great,” I replied, not really thinking it was great at all.

“Okay see you after work. What’s for dinner?”

Dinner? I had to cook dinner? “It’s a surprise,” I said. And it would be too—a surprise for me. I couldn’t cook worth a damn. At school, I had depended upon microwave dinners and fast food. At home, I always left cooking to my mother and sister. After all, that was women’s work. Well, guess what I was now?

“Sounds interesting. See you tonight about six thirty.”

I slumped down in my chair. This was getting more complicated than I could ever imagine.

At about noon, an interesting person came into my office. She was about my height, black with long black hair, and a body that would have stopped traffic. If I had thought my skirt was short, I looked like I was wearing a peasant skirt compared to this girl. I knew I was attractive, but I couldn’t hold a candle to this girl. But I haven’t mentioned the most interesting thing about her yet: she wasn’t transparent.

“Want to grab some lunch, Cindy?” she asked.

I looked at my tiny women’s watch. I could barely read the numbers, but I could see that it was lunchtime. “Okay,” I replied firmly. If this girl was real, I needed to talk to her.

“I’m Dinah Moon,” she told me with a smile. Her words surprised me for she obviously knew my name. There was something about her, too. It was as if she could walk through a rainstorm and not get wet. I knew instinctively that Dinah could tell me what was going on in Ovid—if she would.

“What’s going on here, Dinah?” I asked bluntly as we walked out of the building and headed toward the business district. No sense in delaying my questions. I felt like Alice in Wonderland (even down to the right sex), and something told me Dinah was my Cheshire cat. I didn’t want her to disappear before I got my answers.

“Let’s wait until we’re at lunch to discuss it, okay?”

“Sure,” I agreed, trying clumsily to keep up with her brisk pace. “But would you mind slowing down a bit?”

She stopped and looked at me. “A little new in heels, are we?”

Oh god! She did know! “No, I... I mean...”

“Don’t worry,” she laughed. “I’m the only one who’s noticed.” She slowed her pace to accommodate me.

We walked wordlessly for about a block when we came to a little cafe with a small painted sign in front which said ‘The Greenhouse.’

Dinah gave me a wicked smile and said, “Nothing but soup and salad for us chicks, eh?”

I didn’t bother to answer. Dinah seemed to be having enough fun for the both of us.

The cafe was only about half full. I guess Ovid wasn’t much of a town for soup and salad. It was probably more of a steak and potatoes place, I thought. Still, the Greenhouse was a pleasant enough place with lots of hanging plants and cozy little booths that afforded a fair

degree of privacy. I wondered if that wasn't the real reason Dinah had chosen it for lunch.

We were seated quickly, and each of us ordered a small chef's salad. I ordered a glass of white wine while Dinah ordered an iced tea. "I have to watch my weight," she told me with a wink, "so no booze for Dinah."

"Uh, right," I agreed, stopping the waiter. "Make mine iced tea, too." No sense in tempting the God of Fat. I was going to have to be more careful.

"So how do you like Ovid?" Dinah asked.

"I thought I was a life-long resident," I responded coyly. If she wasn't going to tell me anything, why should I open up to her?

She laughed and patted my slender wrist. "Oh, that is really rich! You sure, are, honey. You've lived here all your life. So let me ask it another way. Is everything going well for you and Jerry?"

"I suppose as well as can be expected under the circumstances," I said evasively. "I'm learning the ropes. Now, how about you? You know what's happening here, don't you?"

"Well," she said with false modesty, "I suppose I do know more than most people around here."

"Then tell me what's going on," I demanded.

She said nothing for a moment as our tea was delivered. I cursed the waiter's timing, for now she would have time to consider her remarks more carefully.

"I really can't tell you everything I know," she said after the waiter left. "But I'll try to answer some of your questions."

"Okay," I agreed, "here's the first question. Why is it you and I know I wasn't Cindy until yesterday?"

"Oh, more people than that know," she said. "When the Judge changes someone—you had figured out it was the Judge, hadn't you?"

I nodded.

“Well, when he changes you, you have about a one in four chance of remembering your past life. If you think about it, your family is right on the mark. You remembered, but Jerry and the twins don’t have a clue, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, there’s about five hundred changees in town right now, so that means about a hundred and twenty-five or so remember. Then there’s maybe another fifty or so who remember some of the time. Usually, they just chalk it up to a dream or fantasy, but every now and then, someone sort of ‘wakes up’ and remembers everything. Some of them remember from then on, and with some of them, the memory fades. Of course, that’s just the people. I don’t know about the animals.”

“Animals?” I asked, sipping my tea. It was good with some sort of berry flavor.

“Oh, sure. The Judge can make you into an animal, too. One guy a couple of weeks ago even got made into a tree. He’s that big oak tree down at Sooner Park by the playground.”

“What did he do to piss off the Judge that much?” I asked, horrified.

“I think he was some kind of child molester. I think the Judge thought if he liked kids so much, he’d put him where he could be around them all the time but never do them any harm. He has a unique sense of justice.”

“Who is he?” I asked.

“The Tree Man? I don’t know his name, but...”

“No,” I interrupted. “Not the Tree Man. The Judge. Who is he?”

She grinned a wicked grin at me. “I don’t think he wants you to know—at least not yet.”

We paused for a moment as our salads were delivered. Ovid might have been a small town in farming country, but the chef’s salad would have been a hit in Chicago. After only toast that morning, I was

hungrier than I realized. I dug in, stopping for only a moment to ask, "So who were you before? I mean, were you a guy, too?"

Her smile this time was forced. "That's not a proper question to ask in Ovid."

"But you know about me," I argued. "Why shouldn't I know about you?"

"Oh, you'll know some day," she promised. "I think the Judge has some interesting things in store for you. After you've worked with him awhile, you'll learn about me."

I hoped he didn't have anything else in store for me. What he had done to me already was bad enough. But on the other hand, at least I was still human. I didn't think I could cope with being turned into an animal or, worse yet, a tree.

"At least tell me about Ovid," I urged. "Anything you can tell me might be of great help later."

"Well, I suppose there's no harm in telling you," she mused. "After all, a lot of what you want to know is probably available at the library. What would you like to know?"

"First, where did it come from? It's not even on the map."

"Well," Dinah said looking up as if reading a book in her mind, "I believe the town was incorporated in 1908, the year after Oklahoma became a state and..."

"I thought you were going to level with me," I said, showing my irritation. "I had a map of the state in the car before we came here, and there was no Ovid on it. The town isn't so small that it wouldn't be on the map."

"Well," she said slowly with a grin, "we did have lot of growth last year. We went from zero to about fifteen thousand."

"Including the ghosts," I prompted.

"Ghosts? Oh, you mean the shades. Yes, including them."

“So where were you before Ovid?” I had asked her before if she had been a guy and she hadn’t answered, but I figured I might as well ask again in a little different fashion. It couldn’t hurt, and I didn’t really expect a straight answer. After all, Ovid seemed short on straight answers.

The question actually caught her by surprise. Her eyes widened for a moment before she said, “That’s not a good question. Don’t ever ask that of anyone. If they want you to know, they’ll tell you—quietly, of course.”

“But you haven’t always been Dinah Moon,” I prompted.

She shook her head, letting her silky black curls drift over her shoulder. “No, I suppose I haven’t, but then again, I suppose I have.”

“You’re talking in riddles,” I pointed out.

She patted my hand again. “Oh, I like you, Cindy. You’ll try to hunt the truth no matter what the cost. I think we’ll be good friends. But come on, let’s go now. Lunch is my treat.”

We walked back to the office together, discussing innocuous things, the weather and so on. I wanted to know more about what had happened to me, but every time I asked a penetrating question, she would deflect it with another innocuous remark. Finally, Dinah waived good-bye to me at the receptionist’s desk and I started back toward my office. Then, I remembered suddenly that Dinah had never stopped to pay for our lunches. She had apparently forgotten, I thought. I’d better run back to her office and remind her. Then I realized that I didn’t know where her office was.

I walked back to the receptionist and asked, “Where is Dinah’s office?”

“Who?” I got a blank stare from the shade (Dinah had called them) at the desk.

“Dinah,” I repeated. “Dinah Moon, the woman who came in here with me a few minutes ago.”

I had a sudden bad feeling about this. I half expected her to say “but you came in here alone,” but she didn’t. What she did say, though,

was almost as bad. "She doesn't work here. I've never seen her before."

Well, what was one more mystery added to all the others? I went back to my office and pulled out the Ovid phone directory. As I anticipated, the book listed no Dinah Moon or D Moon or anything else to them. At least she said she liked me. In this Alice in Wonderland town, that might be important some day.

The rest of the afternoon I used to acquaint myself with my job, whatever that might be. I figured if I was going to be stuck this way for awhile, I needed to follow my job description. The afternoon passed without incident, and soon, it was four thirty. I gathered my purse and locked up the office with a key I found attached to my key ring.

I had no trouble finding the kid's day care facility. I had studied a map of Ovid during my afternoon, and it wasn't hard to figure out where everything was. I suspected I could have put myself on autopilot and made it there, but I didn't want to do that too often. I was afraid of what might happen if I put myself on autopilot and couldn't pull myself back off. Then I would really be stuck, just like Jerry and the kids.

It was funny, I thought as I pulled into the day care parking lot, I was actually starting to think of them as my husband and my children. If they had been able to remember their previous lives as I had, I might have been able to continue to think of them as Randy, Carl, and Steve. But instead, they acted at all times like my husband and my children respectively, and I was forced to interact with them as a wife and mother. I wondered how long it would take before this life seemed completely natural to me. Not long, I was afraid. With no anchor from my previous life to hold on with, I would probably drift into Cindy Patton full time or end up a mental case.

The kids were happy to see me, as most six year olds would be happy to see their mother. Both bounced into the car, talking at ninety miles a minute about their day in first grade and the neat projects they were working on. It was coming at me so fast that I couldn't absorb any of it. I suppose it wasn't just the transformation, but rather the same inattention all working parents gave their children every now and

again. And god knows, I had had a stressful day.

Damn! I was going to have a stressful night, too, if I didn't figure out what to do about dinner. Let's see, I thought, what could I cook? My culinary skills were severely limited, but I thought maybe I could handle a meatloaf and maybe some mashed potatoes. I had made them both before, so it was worth a shot. I knew the address of Duggan's IGA from my perusal of the Yellow Pages at the office and knew I would be expected to shop there. With my husband being, I assumed, the Assistant Manager, where else could I shop?

I was greeted at the store by one "Hi, Cindy" after another. I smiled and said "Hi" to each of them since I was expected to know them. Then a young boy about high school age who was spraying produce asked, "Are you looking for your husband, Mrs. Patton?"

"Uh, no," I replied. "I just have a little shopping to do."

"Okay," he said with a grin. "Anyway, Mr. Patton is in with Mr. Spencer and Mr. Duggan. He got in from Oklahoma City early."

"Thanks." Great, I thought. That meant he would probably be late for dinner. And here I was, gathering the ingredients of a nice meal, and I bet he wouldn't even bother to call to let me know he was going to be late. Just like a man...

What was I thinking? I was a man, at least mentally. Wasn't I? I was beginning to think more than just my body had been changed. Oh, I had memories of my past life which the others didn't have, but my thoughts seemed to be slowly coming into line with my body. This was not good. I only hoped there was enough of my male self left on Monday to demand a return to my old life.

I shopped quickly, brushing off the children's incessant attempts to get me to buy every product in the store with sugar in them. I picked up a couple of pounds of lean (must watch the fats) ground beef, some tomato sauce, a bagged salad and a small bag of potatoes. I also found a cookbook dedicated to quick, easy meals for working mothers and hoped there was a good selection of recipes in it for future meals. And finally, I gave in to the kids and let them pick out a pie for dessert.

I vowed to pass on that, or maybe just a small piece. After all, they picked cherry, which was my favorite.

I don't know if I unconsciously went on autopilot or was just a better cook than I thought, but making dinner proved easier than I thought. Michelle actually helped some, and Mike set the table. I was ready with my meal by six thirty, and to my surprise, Jerry was on time.

"Great!" he said when he saw the meatloaf. "I love meatloaf."

I found myself being oddly delighted by his praise. And, if I do say so myself, the meal was excellent. I took small portions, rewarding myself with a thin sliver of the pie. Still, my smaller body seemed satisfied with the smaller meal, so maybe losing a couple of pounds wouldn't be difficult after all.

The evening went much the same as evenings I remembered with my old family when I was a little boy. Mike and Michelle needed to pack for the weekend church camp. Fortunately, they had been given a list to help parents get them ready. I made the kids actually find the various required items since I had no idea how their clothing was organized. They seemed to be pleased that I would let them do it themselves. Then, before I knew it, they were in bed, leaving me alone with Jerry.

I had felt a gnawing fear rising in me since dinner. Jerry had surprised me with his sexual desires the previous evening, and confused and disoriented, I had given in. Although it had not been unpleasant, the part of my mind which was still Matt found the idea of sex with a man repugnant. It was enough to make me go to church and confess, but I had noted from the list for church camp that we were now all Baptists. In any case, I had to be strong and decline any sexual advances or risk losing Matt forever.

I nearly gasped when finally, about ten, Jerry turned off the TV, got up from his recliner, and came over to where I had been sitting on the couch. Then, to my surprise, he leaned over, gently kissed me on the lips, and said, "Well, good night."

Good night?

“You’re going to bed?” I asked, uncertain as to what his normal bedtime might be.

“Yeah. I’ve got an early meeting with Mr. Duggan and Jack, then a ten o’clock tee time, so I want to be rested. Mr. Duggan was really happy with everything at the store yesterday. I think there may be something good coming up for us.”

A transfer out of Ovid? That’s all I wanted. I wanted out of this town with my old life back. Did Mr. Duggan have that for me? I doubted it. Mr. Duggan was probably just one more shade, playing his part in the saga of Ovid.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Oh, that reminds me, you’ll have to take the kids over for church camp tomorrow. They’re supposed to be there by ten.”

“Okay.”

My entire ‘family’ was in bed now, leaving me to my thoughts. I had expected a repeat of the previous night’s sexual performance and found myself relieved that it had not occurred. But on another deeper level, I found myself a little disappointed. I felt a deep twinge in my body, like an itch that needed to be scratched. Don’t go there, I thought to myself.

With a sigh, I tiptoed off to my bedroom, found a nightie that wasn’t too... well, sexy, and crawled into bed next to my sleeping ‘husband.’ In spite of his snoring, I was asleep within minutes.

Jerry was gone when I woke up, and the sunlight was streaming in the bedroom window. I looked at the clock. It was already eight fifteen and the kids had to be at the church by ten. I jumped out of bed feeling the now almost familiar bounce of my breasts. It was funny how quickly you could get used to large breasts, fleshy hips, and the absence of anything hanging between your legs. I just hoped I wouldn’t have to get used to them permanently.

As I showered, I mentally congratulated myself on getting through an

entire day in this strange body without a major faux pas. Only two more days to go and I could petition the Judge to get back my old body. It was odd, I thought, that I had begun to think of my male body not as my 'proper' body, or my 'rightful' body, although it was those things. Instead, I found myself thinking of it as my 'old' body, almost as I might speak of a castoff article. It only emphasized the urgency of getting to the Judge. Being Cindy Patton was beginning to be normal to me.

I managed to get the kids ready for camp, bathed, clothed and fed and delivered them to the church parking lot with ten minutes to spare. I waved good-bye to them, surprised to find I felt an emptiness as their bus drove away. It was silly, I knew. They were only going to be at the church's campsite perhaps fifteen miles away, but they were my children and I missed them. I was beginning to think of them as my children in any case.

Alone at last, I determined to use my day to drive around the town a little more and finish my afternoon at the library, learning whatever I could about Ovid—both the town and the poet.

My tour of Ovid didn't take long. There were only a few points of interest in the town. On the west side, there was a small private college called Capta College. It consisted of only a handful of buildings, and the entire serene little campus would have fit in a corner of the Notre Dame campus. It appeared to be a liberal arts college, so I decided the college library might have more on Ovid. I resolved to return here rather than the city library.

There were no true shopping centers. Instead, there were businesses sprawled all along the highway as I had noted the night we came into town, and the majority of businesses were concentrated along Main Street. Most of the businesses were local, not national firms. There were a couple of exceptions—a Sears Catalogue store and a Radio Shack, but none of the other business names were familiar. The only store which could pass for a department store was called March's. It was only three stories tall and covered only a quarter of a block. I decided to take a closer look at it, so I parked the car and went in.

Like most of the shade shoppers, I was casually dressed in a knit top and jeans and tennis shoes, so I blended right in (except for the fact that I wasn't semi-transparent). I looked like just another Saturday shopper checking out Ovid's finest. It began as a lark, but slowly but surely I found myself getting into the spirit of a shopping trip. Maybe women really do have a shopping gene. I went through the men's wear section first out of force of habit and found myself wondering what Jerry would look like in some of the shirts. The children's section brought similar thoughts about Mike and Michelle. But it was the women's department I found most interesting. I couldn't help but wonder what I would look like in some of the outfits.

Then I came to the lingerie section. It was sort of a small town version of Victoria's secret, and I found myself surprised that such sexy fashions could have made it to the hinterlands. I reached out to touch a particularly sexy little number—a pink teddy with attractive lace at the hem. It felt soft and silky and I was just thinking...

"It would look good on you," a feminine voice said.

I turned to face one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen in my life. If I had still had a penis, it would have been rock hard just staring into her deep blue eyes. Her hair was golden—not blonde, but golden, looking lush and warm even in the mediocre department store lights. She was about my new height, but where I was merely well proportioned, she was magnificently proportioned. She wore a tastefully conservative periwinkle blue dress with matching jacket, but she could have been wearing yesterday's newspaper and looked just as stylish. And she was real, not a shade. A small store name tag identified her as Vera March.

I had said nothing, so she continued, "I think Jerry would like that little number, Cindy."

I blushed, for I had been thinking the same thing. It was if she had read my thoughts. Had I really been that transparent?

Vera laughed, "Don't be embarrassed, Cindy. Revel in your new womanhood."

She knew, just as Dinah had known!

"I... um... don't think..."

"That's right," she said with a soothing voice which made me warm all over. "Don't think. Love isn't about thinking, is it? It's about feeling. It's the feeling of his strong hands on your breasts and thighs, his loving kisses, his manhood against the entrance to your body..."

I was floating. There was light and there was darkness, somehow mixed together in a pattern of warmth and comfort. My body was trembling in joy. There was Jerry and...

"Cindy!"

"Huh?"

I was standing on the sidewalk in front of the department store, a gray sack with 'March's' stylishly displayed on the side in my hand. I looked up to see Dinah smiling at me.

"Been shopping, huh?" she said. "Whatcha get?"

Before I could protest, she snatched the bag and looked in. "Ooh..." she drawled. "Jerry's gonna eat you alive in that."

As she handed me the bag, I caught a glimpse of the pink teddy. I didn't recall buying it. One moment I was looking at it, then Vera March spoke to me, and then... here I was.

Dinah gave me a knowing smile. "Vera talked you into it, didn't she?"

"Yes, I guess so."

Dinah laughed, "Vera can be very persuasive when she wants to be. I'll bet she and Mark really go to town in bed."

"Who?" I was becoming more bewildered by the moment.

"Mark March, her husband. He's a hunk if ever I saw one. She has him wrapped around her little finger. Why, I can remember... no, I don't think I'll tell you about that just yet."

I bit my lip, feeling the unfamiliar taste of lipstick. "Dinah, who are you?"

She looked at me seriously for a moment, then said, "I'm your friend, honey."

"Why should I believe you?"

She was silent. Finally, she said, "I can't think of one good reason, but I am your friend."

"But you're one of them," I accused, not even sure who 'them' was.

"You, the Judge, Officer Mercer, Vera Martin, and probably her husband are all... playing with me, as if I were some kind of a living puppet."

She studied me for a moment, almost engulfing me with those deep brown eyes. I stood my ground, though, small, blonde, female, and almost ready to cry, but I stood my ground and never looked away from those eyes.

"He's right about you," she finally said, more to herself than to me. Then she was gone. I don't mean she walked away. She was just gone, as if this were a movie in which she was there in one frame and gone in the next. And to think, I had been afraid she would only fade away like the Cheshire cat!

I shuddered for a moment, then looked around. There were only shades nearby, and none of them seemed to notice anything unusual. I sighed and got into the car. It was time to go to the college library and look for some answers.

Suddenly, I remembered it was Saturday, and the Notre Dame-Texas game had an early start. I fiddled with the radio until I found the game. It was already the end of the first quarter and Notre Dame was down 21 to 3. Disgusted, I turned it off. If we had made it to the game, we would all be disgusted by now. Randy had fifty dollars on Notre Dame, and Carl and Steve would have been drunk and disorderly by now. Me, well, somehow it was hard to imagine what I would be thinking if I were at the game. If everything had gone as planned, I would probably have lost my focus on the game and started looking for some nice young Texas coed willing to console a poor Irish supporter for the evening. Now I looked more like that prospective coed than I could

have ever imagined two days before.

The college library was small, I realized, but it was probably larger than the town library. It was an older building, dating back, I would say to the twenties, with faux columns on either side of the doors and high arched windows along the front of the building. As I entered, I saw that the librarian was a shade, but she answered my questions as nicely as if she had been a real person. She directed me to the research section where I immediately looked for and found a history of the town of Ovid.

It seemed the town was founded in 1908, as Dinah had said, but I knew, of course, that the real date was probably less than a year ago. All the older buildings, such as the library, were really built to look old. The college was founded by a group merely listed in the history as a 'religious order.' The current President of the college was a woman named Betty Vest. The primary industries of the town appeared to be agriculture and a couple of small manufacturers, the largest of which was Vulman Industries which made car parts for Ford. I scanned a few more pages in the book until I convinced myself that most of the history was bogus.

Next, I tackled a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. If there were answers in it, they were buried deeply, for the book was not an easy read. I had thought it would be like Edith Hamilton's book, *Mythology*, which was about the only book I had ever read on the subject, but it was considerably more complex. I had read the Hamilton book while still in high school, so while some of the names were familiar to me in examining *Metamorphosis*, many others were not. The Hamilton book was much more readable, I thought.

Metamorphosis contained every imaginable sort of transformation, though. I found men and women changed into trees, fish, spiders, bears, cows, horse, rocks, birds, wolves, and yes, even men changed into women. Whoever had named Ovid had a great sense of the ironic. But there weren't any gods and goddesses running around Ovid changing people into animals. Or were there?

My thoughts were interrupted as I looked at the clock. It was almost

four thirty! I had become so engrossed in the book that I had not even eaten lunch. My stomach suddenly growled in protest. Oh well, at least I had wanted to lose a few pounds. But what was more important was that Jerry had said we would be meeting his bosses at six. That didn't leave me much time to get ready.

I rushed out of the library and drove home. I had to keep my speed legal, though, because for most of the trip, there was a police car next to me, and the driver looked a lot like Officer Mercer. I suddenly realized that I had not seen any police officer except Officer Mercer, and he seemed to be everywhere. I filed that thought for later and rushed home.

As luck would have it, I beat Jerry home by ten minutes, so when he came into the bedroom, I was already stripping out of my jeans. I had no idea what to wear, though, and was considering slipping back into autopilot when Jerry walked into our closet, turned me around and planted a big kiss on my lips.

"Please, Jerry," I gasped, "I'm half naked and I need to get dressed."

"I've got great news, honey," he said with a grin. "You're looking at the new manager of Duggan's IGA here in Ovid!"

Oh great, I thought, we get to stay in Ovid. "That's wonderful... Jerry," I managed.

"Yeah, Jack's going to manage a big new store over in Tulsa, and he recommended me to take over here. That means a raise and that country club membership you've always wanted."

I grew up in a small town, so I knew what a country club membership really meant. Usually in small towns, the country club was the hangout for businessmen and their wives since it often had the only golf course. It wasn't the pillar of society often found in larger cities. Still, it meant Jerry and I would be with the local in crowd. As for his manager, he was probably just another shade, so instead of a store in Tulsa, he would probably be going to wherever the shades went when they were no longer needed.

Jerry grabbed a dress shirt and slacks and headed for the shower, leaving me to try to figure out what to wear. I slipped into autopilot and let my body do whatever it had to do. I slipped off a short black cocktail dress, the proverbial 'little black dress' and proceeded to gather everything I would need to go with it—new bra and panties, a smoky patterned pair of hose with a garter belt, black three-inch heels, and a gold necklace and matching bracelet. The dress was more revealing than I had realized, showing a significant amount of both thigh and breasts, but it was too late to start over. Besides, I told myself, women wore these things all the time. I would be fine. My body seemed to know how to dress and apply makeup, so by some miracle, I managed to be ready a few minutes before six. Even my first attempt at three-inch heels went fine.

Jerry drove, so I didn't have to figure out where Winston's was. It turned out to be on a little hill overlooking the town. The sign in front said 'Best Darn Steaks in Oklahoma,' so it looked like I was going to get a good meal out of this. A suddenly feminine thought crossed my mind as I realized any meal I didn't have to cook was a good meal. I might be in for a future as chief cook and bottle washer for the Patton family for some time to come, and the thought disturbed me.

There was no valet parking. This was a small town, and ideas like valet parking didn't jive with most people's small-town, egalitarian ideas. I knew this because Ovid was in many ways like my hometown. So Jerry let me out at the door, coming around to help me out, for which I was grateful since I still wasn't too sure about the three inch heels.

As I waited for Jerry, two couples went in and one went out. We all smiled and said our "good evenings" to each other, and everyone accepted me as normal. Even though they were all shades, I did feel a little uncomfortable as the men seemed to be staring at my breasts and not at my face.

Jerry collected me and we went in together. The rest of our party was already seated with wine glasses filled in front of them. My spirits perked up at the sight of the wine. A glass of wine would be perfect. I

hadn't had a drink since my transformation, and there is nothing like finding yourself in a body of the wrong sex to make you want a drink.

Jack and Sherry both stood with big smiles on their faces and greeted us. Fortunately, Jerry had given me their names, so I was able to greet Sherry by name and give her a sisterly hug. Although she was a shade, I was struck by how solid she felt. She might appear a little transparent, but it was an illusion. As I had expected, though, Jerry and I were the only two real people at the table.

"Cindy," Jack boomed in a voice thick with an Oklahoma twang (did I sound like that?) that could be heard three tables away, "I want you to meet Henry Duggan and his lovely wife, Christine."

I smiled and shook their hands before sitting demurely next to Jerry.

"Have you told her?" Jack asked Jerry without preamble.

"Not yet," Jerry replied with an innocent lie. He couldn't keep a secret, I suspected.

"Is there something I should know?" I asked innocently, playing along with Jerry's little white lie.

"Cindy," Jack began, "you're looking at the new Store Manager of Duggan's IGA here in Ovid."

Think fast, I told myself. This is supposed to be great news. I get to stay in Ovid near my non-existent parents. I don't have to move. I'm a lucky girl. Come on, Cindy, be happy. "Oh, that's wonderful!" I gushed.

"This calls for a celebration," Mr. Duggan said, beckoning to a waiter. He ordered two bottles of champagne and added to the waiter, "And keep them coming."

The evening was pleasant, with champagne flowing through every course. I tried to order as light a meal as possible, sticking with a salad, a petite filet (of which I only ate half) and no dessert. But the empty calories I picked up from the champagne probably did more damage than the steak would have done.

Sherry and Christine without knowing it initiated me in the ritual of

going to the ladies room as a group. I had to field questions which were new to me such as “I love your dress. Where did you find it?” and “how do you stay so trim with two children?” Apparently I gave all the right answers, for they seemed satisfied that I was one of their sorority.

We broke up about ten. As I stood up, I realized that all the champagne had been too much for my new, smaller body. I weaved slightly, almost falling. The combination of a body with new proportions balanced on high heels, coupled with more champagne than I could handle was almost disastrous. Fortunately, Jerry noticed my distress and put his arm around my waist, as much for support as for affection. He helped me into the car and began the drive home.

“You were a big hit with Christine Duggan,” he told me happily.

“I was?”

“That’s what Henry told me.” I noticed he and Mr. Duggan were now on a first name basis. “He told me he can always tell when his wife likes someone because she invited us to stay with them whenever we’re in Oklahoma City.”

“That’s nice,” I said, wondering when my world would stop spinning around. I vowed to watch my champagne consumption in the future.

When we got home, Jerry put his arm around me again and helped me up to our bedroom. In spite of the champagne, or maybe because of it, I found myself glad to be near him, so when he turned me around to face him and lifted my chin, I actually reached up with my lips to kiss him, enthralled as his tongue entered my mouth.

We were suddenly sliding our hands along each other’s body. I felt his strong back and firm ass while his hands were on my own ass. I could feel the heat from his body as it rubbed against my own.

The first night of my transformation, I had been too shocked to experience my initiation into sex as a woman. It had been as if I were in a bad dream, or rather, in someone else’s bad dream. But this time, I had been a woman for two full days, and the body was not quite as

alien as it had been. That, coupled with several glasses of champagne, was sufficient to make me relaxed and willing. I no longer thought of this man I was holding as my old friend, Randy. Jerry was like Randy in many ways, but he was... well, he was Jerry.

I marvelled at how good it felt to hold on to his muscular body, and how my nipples brushing against the hair on his chest felt so hard and pleasantly sensitive. I began to feel something hard against the inside of my thigh, and then I felt a liquid warmth coming from between my own legs.

Jerry gently laid me on the bed and spread my legs. I knew what was expected of me and arched my back as I felt him enter me. He was gentle, playing around the entrance to my vagina rather than ploughing into me, and I began to feel a wave of pleasure rising in me unlike anything I had ever felt before until I heard Jerry cry out and felt something warm in me as he gave an orgasmic shudder.

I realized in the pleasurable fog which claimed me that we had both orgasmed together. I had never in my entire life, or perhaps I should say either of my lives felt such intense pleasure. Between the buzz from the champagne and the afterglow of my orgasm, I slipped off into a blissful sleep.

I was awakened by the morning sun peeking into our room through a crack in the drapes. I became aware suddenly of two things. The first thing was that I was still as female as ever, as evidenced by the fact that I was still completely nude, having fallen asleep after sex. The second thing I noticed was that Jerry was just as nude as I, sleeping peacefully beside me. I had avoided a hangover, but just barely, for there was the faint fuzziness I always experienced after too much liquor.

What had I done? I thought to myself. For the second night, I had experienced sex as a woman, but this time, it was different from the first. The first time, it was just surprisingly pleasant, but this time, it was terrific. I had enjoyed every minute of it, and I found my body even now getting turned on at the sight of the man sleeping beside me.

I slipped out of bed and covered myself in a filmy peach-colored robe. It did little to hide my body, but it was the principle of the thing. I was at least clothed again. Every day—in fact, every hour—I was becoming more and more Cindy Patton. Did this mean that eventually, I would be oblivious to what had happened to me as the rest my family?

My thoughts were interrupted as Jerry woke with a groan and asked, “What time is it?”

I looked at the clock on my nightstand. “Eight o’clock.”

Jerry leaped out of bed, nearly startling me. “Jesus! We need to hurry. It will be time for church in an hour.”

Church? As Randy, he had seldom gone to church. Even when he did, it was never on Sunday mornings. Like me, he had been raised a Catholic, and evening Masses were much more convenient. Sunday morning Masses were too much of an effort, especially after Saturday night parties.

“Church?” I asked.

“We’re greeting at the nine thirty service, remember?”

Greeting? Oh, that’s all I needed. I would have to stand there in a dress, pantyhose and heels and smile and shake hands with hundreds of people, most of whom didn’t really exist.

“And then we have to pick up the kids from Sunday school. That’s when their overnight camp ends.” He looked at me for a moment. “Are you feeling all right?”

I smiled a reassuring smile. “I’m fine.” What was I going to say? No, I’m not fine. I just had my sex changed and now I’m forced to live as a woman raising two kids who used to be my fraternity brothers while I’m on the receiving end of a game of hide the sausage with my former best friend. Oh, and to top it off, I’m surrounded by people who aren’t really there and a few others who are but still don’t seem normal. Maybe I wasn’t really fine, but the only person I really needed to talk to about it wouldn’t be back until the next day.

With a sigh of resignation, I headed for the shower while mentally

planning what I would have to wear to church.

Jerry and I made it with ten minutes to spare. I managed to cut a little time off by fixing a breakfast of juice, coffee and toast. Jerry was expecting bacon and eggs, but I told him there wasn't time. Besides, I thought to myself, I couldn't afford the calories.

Jerry wore a sport coat and tie, and I found myself envying the good old days when I would have been similarly attired. As Cindy, though, I had to find the right dress (a light blue knit dress which had a little longer skirt—that is, ending at the top of the knee), neutral pantyhose, matching shoes and purse (white two inch heels and a small white leather purse), and the right accessories (gold necklace with matching earrings and a simple gold bracelet). Then came the makeup. I had to go back on autopilot for the first time in about fifteen hours. I was learning how to be a woman, but I wasn't ready to ride without the training wheels when it came to applying makeup.

I did a lot of smiling, handshaking, and saying "Hi" to the members of the congregation as if I knew them. Most were shades, but every now and then, a real person would come up to shake my hand. A real person's handshake didn't really feel any different from a shade's handshake, but with the shades, it was disconcerting to realize that I could almost see right through them.

One real person particularly caught my attention. He was young, perhaps sixteen tops and dressed in a blue dress shirt and what appeared to be a Jerry Garcia tie. He was pleasant looking, sort of like the proverbial boy next door. What caught my interest though was when he shook my hand and said softly, "Welcome to Ovid."

He knew. He was one of the ones who retained his memory. There was a little coffee social after services, and I made a mental note to talk to him when we could be in private.

This was my first Baptist service, and I was comforted to see it wasn't too unlike a Catholic service. Actually, given that I was now wearing a dress, I was just as happy to go through a church service without kneeling. The minister was a shade, but his sermon was a bit more

passionate than any I had seen at Mass. The hymns were mostly familiar, and I was somehow pleasantly surprised to learn that I had a very pleasing soprano voice. Jerry's clear tenor matched well with my voice, and I found it fun to be sharing the Hymnal with him as we sang in harmony.

After the service, Jerry stopped to speak with several of his friends while I got a cup of coffee and sought out the boy I had greeted earlier. He smiled when he saw me approach. Looking about to see that there was no one else in easy earshot, he smiled and said, "I'm Danny Mitchell. So how is your new life working out?"

I liked that. There was no preamble. I suspected this type of conversation was discouraged in Ovid, so it paid to get right to the point.

"All right, I guess," I told him. "I'm not exactly used to it yet." I wanted to add 'and I want to get out of here before I do get used to it,' but I didn't.

He smiled again. "It takes a while to get used to it. I've been here almost a year now."

"Then were you one of the first real residents?" I asked, warming to this young man.

"Pretty close," he agreed. "When we got here, I think the town had just gotten started. You could go all day and not see anyone who was real."

"We?"

"Oh, I suppose I should tell you my story. I was on a college football team last fall. We were flying down here from Northwest Missouri State to play Muskogee State in football when our plane developed engine trouble and had to land in Ovid."

"Ovid has an airport?" I asked, surprised as I took a sip of coffee.

He nodded. "It does. It isn't much of an airport, really—just a couple of private hangars and a lighted concrete runway, but it was big enough for our chartered plane. Anyhow, the coach explained our problem to

the police officer who greeted us.”

“Officer Mercer?” I asked on a hunch.

“Who else? He’s the entire police force, but he seems to be everywhere. I’ve even seen two police cars on the street, both driven by Officer Mercer.”

So had I.

“Anyhow,” Danny continued, “we were taken into town on a bus that... you know, it’s funny, but I just happened to think of something. There was a bus waiting for us at the airport as if they knew we were coming.”

“I imagine they did,” I told him.

He nodded in agreement. “We appeared before the Judge right away. I couldn’t imagine why they took us to see him. I mean, we hadn’t done anything wrong. The Judge came out and muttered something I couldn’t understand, and then the changes began. About half of us stayed boys, although different, younger boys. We were all high school age. A couple of the white guys turned black and a couple became Hispanic, and some of the blacks and Hispanics on the team turned white. The rest changed into girls—all kinds of girls. Some were cute and some were plain. Again, some of their races changed. There was a lot of yelling and screaming from those of us who remembered who we had been, but the rest of the team just stood there and smiled as the changes claimed them. They didn’t even seem to notice what was happening.”

“Did the pilot and the coaching staff turn into students, too?” I asked.

“No,” Danny said, shaking his head. “Coach Wallace—he was the head coach—is now Miss Samson, our History teacher. The pilot was a woman. She’s a teller in one of the banks now. The rest of the crew just changed into people I haven’t met yet. Officer Mercer took me ‘home’ after that. I found out my parents weren’t real, but they were okay to me. Dad is real now, but I don’t know who they got to be him and he doesn’t remember.”

I hesitated for a moment, then asked, “What about the ones who became girls and remembered who they were. How did they handle it?”

“Pretty well, actually. One of them was our starting halfback, and he... she is now our head cheerleader. Another player—he was a defensive end like me—was runner-up for Homecoming Queen. She remembers everything, but she’s adapted well. She and I date quite a bit and I think she’s starting to like being a girl.”

“It sounds as if things are turning out all right for them,” I commented.

Danny nodded. “I think so. Of course it’s a lot harder for them than it is for you or me.”

I was puzzled. “Why do you say that?”

“Well,” he explained, “I was originally male, and you were originally female, so...”

“Wait a minute!” I interjected. “What makes you think I was originally female?”

His eyes went wide and his face reddened. “You mean you weren’t a woman before? Oh, I’m sorry. It’s just that you act like a woman. I mean, I was watching you while you were greeting, and then in church with your husband. You talk and act just like a woman. Did I say something else wrong?”

“Oh, no,” I told him. “Excuse me, Danny. I’d better go now.”

I turned away without another word. Danny had said something wrong all right. How could he have ever thought that I was originally female? I hadn’t changed that much, had I? Maybe, I thought, my body was on autopilot more than I realized. Either that, or my female body was beginning to affect my predominately male mind.

As Jerry and I drove home from church after picking up the kids, I began to sort through my thoughts in light of Danny’s assumption. First, there was the sex. I had experienced sex as a woman on two evenings now. How did I feel about it? Did I enjoy it? I had to admit that I did. The physical sensations were very pleasant. I began to feel

a moistness in my crotch just thinking about it. But what did this mean? Was I gay? I didn't think so. I had been a normal heterosexual male in all ways before coming to Ovid. Now, I was a normal heterosexual female. It seemed the right thing to be.

Then there were the kids. I had to admit when we picked them up after church that I was glad to see them. Was it because I was worried about Steve and Carl? I didn't think so. In some bizarre way, I was beginning to think of them as my children. It was hard to think of Mike as Steve and even harder to think of Michelle as Carl. They were happy, healthy, normal children in every respect.

I began to realize that I was becoming Cindy Patton in every way that was meaningful. I was beginning to think of myself as a wife and mother, to the detriment of my male ego. It was imperative that I see the Judge in the morning before Matt O'Hara disappeared completely.

Sunday afternoon was just a normal weekend day for the Patton family. Jerry settled in to watch a football game. Apparently, we were Dallas Cowboy fans to my chagrin. I had been a Steelers fan as long as I could remember since I grew up in Pennsylvania. In some ways, I mused, supporting the Cowboys would be tougher than being a woman. Although I said all the right things as we watched the game together, I was secretly glad when they were upset by the lowly Atlanta Falcons.

The kids just played and had a wonderful time of it. Two little girls (one a shade) came by to play with Michelle, while Mike was content to read comics and watch TV. In some ways, he was just like Steve had been. I resolved that if I had to stay in this role, I would raise Mike to be a better man than Steve had been. But then, what mother doesn't want the best for her son?

I actually managed to make a pretty decent snack to tide everyone over, and then put together a meal I was actually quite proud of. It consisted of baked chicken and fresh green beans and a salad. It was nutritious and pretty low in fat. I had a waistline to think about.

By evening, the kids were tired, so I had no trouble putting them to

bed. As I put them both to bed, I felt feelings of accomplishment I had never felt before. I think they must be feelings only a mother can experience. It was a feeling of pride that I had actually created these two children. I knew, of course, that I had never experienced their actual birth, but the feeling that I had was there nonetheless.

Jerry had spent the evening reading and watching TV. It was how the old me would have spent the evening as well, but I felt the need to putter around the house a little bit. I did a quick load of laundry and folded it. Then, as I was putting it away, I noticed the sack from Martin's. I had forgotten about it with all that had happened over the last day. I pulled the pink teddy out of the sack and held it up. It was incredibly sexy, and I found my groin becoming warm just looking at it. The matching panties were so sheer and soft...

There was something magical about the outfit. As I held it, I began to wonder what I would look like in it. I wondered what Jerry would think of it. I smiled at the thought.

A part of me knew that this was not what I should be thinking or feeling. I was not really a woman in spirit, only in body. Then I remembered the woman who had sold me the teddy. She had murmured something to me as she sold it, something hypnotic. I was being forced into these thoughts and feelings, I realized. They were not really my own.

My body disagreed. I began to feel the soft, yielding warmth between my legs, urging me to put on the teddy. It didn't seem to be worth resisting, so I stripped off my clothes and put it on. The panties softly caressed my dampening crotch, and the silky feel of the teddy on my erect nipples made my body shudder involuntarily.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I was absolutely sexy. To hell with the five pounds I needed to lose. A little touch up of lipstick, expertly applied, a brush through my hair, and a little perfume spritzed in all the right places, and I was fantastic. For good measure, I slipped on a pair of three inch white heels. I smiled at the finished product and started into the den.

“Honey,” I called softly from behind him.

He turned around and I nearly laughed as his mouth fell open. Wordlessly, he jumped from his chair and slipped his arm around my waist. I smiled at him as we walked together silently back into the bedroom.

I won't go through all the details. Let's just say that it was everything I hoped it would be the first, second, and third time. When we had finished, we were both exhausted and fell asleep in each other's arms.

I awakened the next morning to the sound of Jerry in the shower. I felt sticky between my legs and realized with a blush that I had slept through the night without cleaning up. It had been a contented sleep, I knew, and even in the light of day with my reason in control, I realized how fantastic the evening had been. As a man, I had never felt the waves of pleasure this new body had given me.

And yet, I realized suddenly, this was the day I would confront the Judge and ask him to change me back into my male self. What would it be like to be male again? I had actually grown used to the vacant feeling between my legs, and my breasts felt as if they had always been there. What would happen to Jerry and the kids? Could I bargain to get back all of our old lives. And what if I did? How could I ever face Randy again after what we had done repeatedly as Jerry and Cindy? Would Steve and Carl be as happy as my wastrel fraternity brothers as they seemed to be as Mike and Michelle? These were nagging questions for which I had incomplete answers.

And what was going on in Ovid? I thought I knew what, but not why. The answers had come to me slower than they might have had I not been faced with adjusting to a new life at the same time. But I was certain now that I knew who the Judge and Dinah and all the rest of them were. Somehow, I should have been more frightened, knowing what I suspected I knew, but I wasn't.

I dropped the kids off at school and drove to work. In the parking lot, I looked myself over one more time. I had tried to look very professional for my confrontation with the Judge. I wore a cream-colored silk

blouse, a tan suit, two-inch brown heels, and had carefully styled my hair as best I could. My makeup was a little understated, and I thought I actually looked like a lawyer myself. I had sought that look. I had a case to plead.

I arrived in the office before the Judge and had a sinking feeling. What if he didn't come in again today? I was beginning to lose my grip on my male identity; I was fully aware of that. Was that his plan? To hide until I no longer had the will to return to my male form? How long would that be? If I were to remain Cindy Patton for even a few more days, I would completely lose my resolve to return to my old life. Each time I looked into my children's eyes or felt the embrace of my husband or admired my image in the mirror, a little more of Matt died.

My fears turned out to be groundless, though, as he entered the office at exactly nine o'clock. He was dressed in a conservative gray suit with a red and gray striped tie and crisp white shirt. There was a newspaper tucked under his arm.

"Good morning, Cindy," he said with a smile, as if there was nothing unusual. I thought for a moment that perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps the Judge knew no more than Jerry or the kids. But I dismissed the idea as quickly as I thought of it. The Judge had to be behind our transformations, and I was sure I knew who, or at least what, he was.

"Why did you do this to me?" I asked with a frown.

To my consternation, his smile grew wider. "Why did I do what?"

"You know what. Why did you change me into... into this?" I gestured at myself. "And why did you turn Randy into Jerry and Steve and Carl into children?"

He actually laughed. "Come into my office, Cindy, and I'll answer all of your questions."

When I was seated in front of his desk, he pushed the paper in front of me. "This may answer the 'why,' Cindy."

I looked at the paper. It was a Friday Tulsa paper. I scanned the headlines, trying to determine from the front page exactly what he was

talking about. There were the usual national and international stories, but it was a headline and a picture which went with it that caught my eye. In the picture, the remains of a charred Firebird were clearly visible. The headline read 'Five Die in Fiery Crash!' With a sickening shock, I realized the car was Randy's. There could be no doubt as to who four of the five who died were.

"Do you mean... we're actually... dead?"

To my relief, he shook his head. "No, not really. This is only what should have happened."

It had to be the farm truck we almost hit, I realized. I remembered we were headed right for it and then... it was gone. We had hit that truck, I realized, or at least we should have hit it. Then we would have all died, taking the driver of the farm truck with us.

I looked up from the paper to face the Judge. "You saved us then?"

He nodded. "In a manner of speaking I did. If I had simply saved you, there would have been too many loose ends in reality. Your loved ones would have found you had disappeared, and the subsequent search might have led them here. What I did was erase you from reality. If you were to call your friends from school or your family, you would discover that they had never heard of you. Then, you four and the truck driver became mine to mold as I wished."

"But that isn't right," I protested. "What gives you the right to do this to us?"

"I could say might makes right," the Judge said grimly, "but I might also remind you that in many cultures, saving a life means that life is mine to do with as I please. In other cultures, I would be obligated to take care of you however I saw fit. Any of these answers gives me the right. Besides, you participated in the selection of your roles here. Observe."

Suddenly, I could see the four of us back on the road again... The old me was speaking.

"There's no Ovid on the map," I was saying.

Steve, drunkenly from the back seat yelled, "Are we there yet?" as Carl snickered.

"Quiet, guys," I had growled.

"Who are you?" Steve had taunted, "our mother?"

The scene faded. "I rest my case," the Judge said.

"So based on that exchange, I get to be the mother?" I practically yelled.

"It won't be so bad," the Judge said. "Dinah tells me you've adapted to your role quite well. And I understand Vera sold you quite a sexy outfit on Saturday. Have you had a chance to wear it yet?"

My blush told him that I had.

"I thought so. As I said, you seem to be adapting well."

It was true, I realized. I had been a woman for—what?—less than four days, and yet I had dressed as a woman, acted as a woman, and even on several occasions made love as a woman. Was I revolted by all of this, particularly the lovemaking? Yes, at first. It had all seemed so alien to me, but now? This morning, I had gotten dressed and put on my makeup as if it were second nature. I walked confidently in heels. I had kissed my husband good-bye as if I hated to see him go, and I had hugged my children before school as if I were trying to return them to my body from which they had supposedly come.

"All right," I granted. "I suppose I have adapted, and this life isn't so bad. But why did you do this to us? You didn't save us out of the goodness of your heart."

The Judge smiled. "I was right not to underestimate you. To explain why, you have to know who I am. Have you figured that out yet?"

"I think I have," I admitted. "There were plenty of clues, but the answer was almost too fantastic. That's why I rejected it when I first thought of it. But I suppose it was no more fantastic than what you did to us."

"And the answer is?"

“You are the Roman gods,” I ventured, almost certain I was correct.

“Very good!” he replied, clapping his hands as he leaned back in his leather chair. “Have you figured out which ones?”

“I think so. You are Jupiter.”

He nodded, still smiling. “Correct.”

“Dinah is Diana, Officer Mercer is Mars.”

“Wrong on that one! Officer Mercer is Mercury.”

“Of course,” I said. “I should have guessed from the name. But wouldn’t Mars have made a better police officer?”

The Judge grunted. “I don’t think so. Mars is too much of a martinet. I needed someone who would be a little more understanding, and of course, I needed someone who could be everywhere almost at once. Mercury has the speed to do so. Mars, along with his wife, Venus, whom I believe you have met?”

I nodded. No wonder I bought the teddy from her and used it so amorously. I was under a spell from Venus.

“Anyhow, they run Martin’s Department Store. I suppose I should have let Mercury run it. He is, after all, the God of Commerce, but someone once compared business to war, so I suppose it all works out.”

“Are there any other gods I should be aware of? I wouldn’t want to cross any of them,” I told him. “The way I talked to Dinah, I’m surprised she didn’t turn me into a stag like she did in *Metamorphosis*.”

“Oh, that’s just the legend that survived,” he told me. “Have you ever heard of Siproetes?”

I frowned. “No, I don’t think so. I didn’t see it in Ovid.”

“It isn’t in any of Ovid’s works,” he told me. “The legend of Siproetes didn’t survive to your time. The only reference to him is in a work called *Metamorphoses* by Antoninus Liberalis. Siproetes was a young man in Crete who saw Diana—she was called Artemis then, by the

way—bathing naked in a fountain. Rather than change him into a stag as in the legend you know, she changed him into a woman. Someday, I'll tell you the whole story of that incident, but as you can see, your current transformation meets with her approval.

“As far as any other gods you should be aware of, well, you'll meet others, I'm sure, but don't worry about them now. They all know I personally decided to make you and your friends into the Patton family. I doubt if any of them will bother you. Actually, there are only twelve true gods in the pantheon. The rest are sort of second-rate gods. I'll introduce you as the occasion arises.”

My conversation with the Judge had not worked out quite the way I had thought it would. I had as much as agreed to remain Cindy Patton. I supposed I could have suffered a worse fate. Besides, in a perverse sort of way, it was actually fun to be a woman. It's just that I had thought from the moment that my transformation had been all wrong. Now, though, it seemed so right. Matt O'Hara had another semester of undergraduate work left followed by three years of law school. Cindy Patton had the opportunity to participate in the most unique exercise of the law ever imagined. And I would get to be with Jerry and the kids.

“All right,” I sighed. “I guess I'm Cindy Patton for keeps. But what am I supposed to do around here?”

“Oh, general secretarial chores will be your official job.”

“And unofficially?”

“Very good. You will attend court sessions with me,” he told me. “I need someone who can chronicle all of the cases as they actually occur. Otherwise, eventually even I will forget who was who around here.”

I frowned. “You mean you want me to be the court reporter?”

“No, no,” he replied, shaking his head. “I want you to tell them as stories. You will be my female Homer, telling the stories of those who visit my courtroom. I want you to tell the tales in your own words,

expressing your own feelings. The stories will, of course, be only for the consumption of myself and my fellow gods. Yours will be the most important job of any mortal in Ovid. How does that sound?"

I had to admit to myself that it was intriguing. I would be witness to remarkable events that no mortal had witnessed before. And since I had wanted to be an attorney before my transformation, I would see courtroom justice meted out in a way I could never have imagined a few days before. How could I say no? I smiled at the Judge and nodded my head. "Okay," I said, "you have a deal."

He clapped his hands. "Excellent, my dear. You won't regret this. Now, we had better go to court. Officer Mercer has just stopped a drunk driver on the edge of town. Such childish behavior warrants a stern sentence."

"How did you know he just picked up a drunk driver?" I asked, hurrying to keep up with him as he headed for the courtroom.

The Judge only laughed.

'You know,' I said to myself, 'come to think of it, this could be fun.'

Ovid II: Return to Ovid: The Lawyer

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I was up to my eyeballs in work.

If somebody had told me a little over a month ago that I would be the secretary to a municipal judge in Oklahoma, I would have snickered at them. If they had told me that the judge in question was in fact the Roman god Jupiter, I would have chuckled at them. If they had told me that instead of my normal male self, a college student from Notre Dame, I would be an attractive twenty-five year old woman with a husband and two children, I would have laughed so hard tears would have streamed down my face. But I wasn't laughing now.

Here I was, that attractive woman I spoke of, trying to make sense out of my job. I had come to accept my new life, and even enjoy my roles as a wife and mother, but on the job, I was frustrated. I had been hired to tell the stories of the other humans who came before the Judge to be, against their will, transformed into the residents of Ovid Oklahoma. In order to do my job, I had to sit in the courtroom for every trial and watch as the Judge passed his unusual sentences. It wasn't all that hard, really. Court was held Monday through Thursday from nine until noon, if the Judge was in town. The rest of my time was spent trying to make sense of the records of the court.

The Judge could hold about four trials an hour. I know that sounds incredible, but he didn't exactly pay attention to normal courtroom procedure. Usually, he would just hear the charges and pass sentence. The defendants were usually too frightened to say anything or were in a virtual trance during which they thought everything was perfectly normal. The frightened ones would find themselves transformed over the next hour into residents of Ovid. They would be confused at first, but they would usually find themselves playing along before very long. What else could they do? I mean, look at me. Here I

was, an attractive young woman whom everyone in town knew to be Cindy Patton. What would have happened to me if I had told them my real name was Matt O'Hara? I'd be in a rubber room if I did. Most other people realized the same thing, if they remembered who they were.

About three out of four people were in a trance before the Judge. They would leave the courtroom, thinking they had gotten off lightly. They, too, would transform into new identities over the next hour. The difference is, they would never realize it. They would believe they had always been whomever they had transformed into.

Sometimes, I thought they were the lucky ones. My husband and two children, for example, believed they had always been the individuals they were now. None of them realized they were my college classmates, and they never would. But here I was, as female as I could be, after twenty-one years as a male. As much as I was learning to enjoy my new role, it had its trying moments.

Also, if I had remembered only my new life, I would have probably been given everything I needed to perform my job. In my present state, however, there was no one to train me. The Judge was nice to me, but he wasn't a teacher. Most of it I had picked up with a little effort. I knew I was supposed to schedule the Judge's trials (but never other times; he took care of that himself). I had to submit dummy paperwork to the state to make it look as if Ovid was just another normal Oklahoma municipality. But it was the other part of the job I had the most trouble with. How was I supposed to report on the transformees if the Judge never gave me all the information? All I knew was what happened in the courtroom.

When I would ask the Judge for some help, he would just smile and say, "Don't worry about it. You'll figure it out."

Figure what out? I had never even been able to figure out what the Roman gods were doing in a small town in Oklahoma. The Judge never got around to telling me that, either.

I was seriously thinking about finding a match to burn the pile of rough

notes regarding the trials which I had assembled on my desk when the receptionist buzzed me.

“What is it, Mary?” I tried not to snap at her. She was only a shade, but shades had feelings, too.

“Dina Luna is here to see you.”

Who? I thought. I knew a Dinah—Dinah Moon but... Wait a minute. Luna is Spanish for Moon. “Send her in,” I told Mary.

In moments, there appeared a stunning Hispanic woman with long black hair and a perfect body encased in an expensive red dress which looked as if it had been painted on. It was Dinah all right, in a brand new body every bit as stunning as the black one I knew her in. I guess when you’re really the goddess Diana, you can look however you want.

“Buenas Dias, Chiquita!” she greeted me, swaying over to give me a sisterly hug. “Como estás?”

“I’ve been fine, Dinah,” I said, returning the hug. I was actually glad to see her. Of the gods and goddesses I had met in Ovid, Dinah was the only one I had come to consider my friend.

“It’s Dina now, hermana,” she said proudly. Then, motioning to her body, she asked, “What do you think of it?”

“It’s stunning,” I had to admit. “But so was your other body. Why did you change?”

“Why not?”

I guess when you’re a goddess, why not?

“But how about you, Señora Patton?” she said, taking a closer look at me. I was dressed in a rather flattering outfit if I do say so. It was proper business attire, but it was very feminine as well. It consisted of a silk blouse patterned with tiny lavender flowers and a gray skirt, nearly as short as hers. I had on two-inch gray heels and light, almost white stockings. I thought I looked pretty hot for a mother of two.

“Do you like it?” I asked, striking a pose.

“On you, it looks magnifico,” she said. “You just bought it.”

It wasn’t a question; it was a statement. “Yes, how did you know?”

“Because I picked out all your other clothes.”

“You?”

She shrugged. “Who else? You didn’t think the Judge picked out your wardrobe, did you?”

“I guess not.” I really hadn’t given it much thought. No wonder my wardrobe looked so good. Dinah had exquisite taste.

“And have you lost some weight?” she asked with a critical eye.

“Four pounds,” I confirmed, proudly. I had looked good from the beginning, but another two or three pounds and I would stop traffic.

“Good for you!” she said, clapping her hands. “How did you do it?”

“Oh,” I began, “I just watch what I eat. And I try to lay off alcohol.”

“Then it’s time to backslide,” she said with a devilish twinkle in her dark eyes. “Let’s go get a drink.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t,” I protested. I hadn’t had a drink in weeks—too many empty calories.

“Why not? It’s Friday and ten minutes until quitting time, and the Judge is out of town.”

True, and why not? Jerry and I had planned a romantic evening. I had been out of action for a few days with my first period. It was almost enough to make me run screaming to the Judge renewing my demands to be male again. But at least it was over for another month. Both Mike and Michelle had been invited to sleepovers, so Jerry and I had planned a nice dinner at Winston’s and then... whatever came naturally.

Then disaster struck. Jerry’s night manager had gotten sick, so Jerry had to fill in for him until the store closed at nine. By then, he would probably be too tired for any fun. The thing that really annoyed me was that Jerry’s night manager was actually a shade. That meant he

wasn't even real, so he couldn't really get sick, or at least I didn't think he could. So now, instead of a pleasant evening out with my husband, I was at loose ends until the store closed.

"Oh, all right," I said. At least I could kill an hour or so of my wait with Dinah—or rather Dina.

"Bueno! Let's go."

I left the pile just where it was on my desk and locked the door. I would have to get in a little early on Monday before the Judge saw it, but I couldn't face it any more today. I was closing up ten minutes early with work still on my desk and was about to drink wine with my friend. I was a bad girl. And it felt good.

"We'll walk over to the Greenhouse," Dina said. "It's only a block."

"Sure," I agreed. It was only a block, and although late fall could be bitterly cold in Oklahoma from what I had heard, it was remarkably mild, even though the afternoon sun was very low in the sky. I slipped on my trench coat just to be safe since the temperature would probably drop before we left the Greenhouse. Dina didn't bother with a coat. I guess goddesses don't get cold.

We walked briskly toward the restaurant, causing Dina to remark, "You're walking lot better in heels now."

"I've had a lot of time to practice."

She laughed.

The Greenhouse did a decent lunch business, but the dinner crowd was usually a little sparse. Also, people in small towns don't spend much time in the bars after work, so the place was practically empty when we entered. I think Dina really liked it like that. It meant we could talk without eavesdroppers picking up our conversation. I was a little excited at the prospect since I had questions for her.

We each ordered a glass of Chardonnay and talked of inconsequential things until our drinks came. After a sip each, Dina began, "So let's hear it."

“Hear what?” I asked.

“The interesting cases. What else?”

“Okay,” I agreed, swirling the wine in its glass. “But first, tell me why all of the gods are here in Ovid.”

“They’re not,” she replied.

“Then what are...”

“Some of the gods are in Ovid,” she corrected. “Some never come here. Take my brother, Apollo. He’s never been to Ovid and will probably never come here. He didn’t even like Rome. He used to spend all his time in Greece being the god of beauty and truth and poetry and soothsaying and whatever else they could hang on him.”

This was off the subject, but I was intrigued. “I thought he was the sun god.”

She shook her head. “No, he was never that. He was the god of light, whatever that meant, but never the sun god. He’s probably sunning himself on some beach in Hawaii right now, waiting for the big wave. He usually looks like the god of surfing.”

I took another sip of wine. It tasted good, but I hated to think how many calories were in it. “So, back to my original question. What’s Ovid all about?”

Dina just shook her head and chuckled. “Girl, you won’t give up, will you? I can’t really tell you. It’s the Judge’s idea and only he can tell you. Don’t worry, though, he will. You just have to be patient. Now, about those interesting cases...”

I shrugged. “There haven’t been that many interesting ones, just your standard transformations and sex changes. Besides, I haven’t had time to write any of them down.”

“Write them down?” she repeated, laughing. “Hasn’t the Judge told you? You don’t have to write them down.”

“I don’t?”

“Of course not, silly. All the stories are in your head. All you need to do is call them up. That’s the power the Judge has given you.”

I thought about that for a moment. When I first went to the Judge and asked to be returned to my old sex, he had somehow made me see our arrival in Ovid. It had been for a few minutes as if I were back in my old body. Apparently, I could do this with others as well, if I could figure out how to do it.

“What do I need to do?” I asked.

Dina smiled and replied, “Just think of the case and remember who the defendant was. You’ll slip off into a little trance, and I’ll be able to see and feel what happened through you.”

“Well, okay,” I agreed reluctantly. “I’ll try. I guess the most interesting case happened about two weeks after I went to work for the Judge. You see, there was this lawyer...”

Damn, this car was hot!

I felt ten–no, fifteen years younger as I put my Lexus GS400 through its paces on the less-travelled highways of Oklahoma. I was really glad I had decided to drive instead of fly this trip. To fly from Oklahoma City to Little Rock would have involved either a small commuter airliner (which I hate) or changing planes in Dallas, Houston, or St Louis. Why bother? They weren’t that far apart, and it was a weekend, and I did have a brand new car–the hottest sports sedan on the market, I had been told. I had to thank the guy who sold me the car when I got back to Dallas. He told me to really appreciate it, I’d have to go on a road trip. He was right on the money.

I hadn’t felt so relaxed in years. I had just finished up a trial in Dallas, getting Billy Bob Dooley off on the murder charge for killing his girl friend. He was a rising country western star with a couple of best-selling CDs, and his studio was willing to pay big bucks to get him off the hook. It wasn’t easy, either, because he did kill her. I mean, everyone knew that. He even admitted it. But it took an attorney of my

stature to get him off the hook by making a jury believe that he was acting in self-defense. How a jury could be made to believe that a two-hundred pound man was defending himself against a slip of a girl was a real test of my abilities.

How did I do it? Well, the beauty of the American judicial system is that you don't have to prove you're innocent, but the prosecution has to prove you're guilty. The deck is pretty well stacked in the defense's favor. All you have to do is make the jury unsure. If there is any doubt in their collective minds, the jury must rule in favor of the defendant. With Billy Bob, I had to make him look like a big old country boy who wouldn't hurt a fly. Then, I had to make his dead girl friend look like an unstable person who was capable of anything—a real Lizzie Borden type. Then, when Billy Bob testified that he tried to break off with her and let her down gently, only to have her attack him with a pair of sharp scissors, he tried to defend himself. But the poor guy didn't know his own strength and pushed her too hard, forcing her to fall down a flight of stairs landing on the sharp point of her own scissors.

Was it true? Maybe. Did I believe it? Not for a minute. Billy Bob is a crass character who wouldn't have given a damn about her feelings. She may have made a threatening gesture with the scissors, but he wasn't the sort of man who would be frightened by it. He probably pushed her to put her in her place, and down the stairs she went.

Did he kill her on purpose? I don't know. I like to think that he didn't. In any case, if the DA had settled for involuntary manslaughter, he might have won. But the DA was after something bigger. He thought a win against a star like Billy Bob would have set him up for higher political office. His reach exceeded his grasp, though, when he came up against me. Now, he would be lucky to get re-elected as DA.

A small portion of my fees bought this \$50,000 Japanese Rice Rocket, so I was in tall cotton. Then, a chance to consult on a couple of cases, one in Oklahoma City and one in Little Rock, gave me the perfect excuse to go on a road trip. After I was finished, I would be off for Branson, Missouri, where I would meet up with Talia Moore, the hot new singing sensation. A few days shackled up with her and I would

be rested and ready for the next case. How did I meet Talia? Oh, I got her brother off on a murder charge last year, and she was so grateful that one thing led to another.

One thing often did lead to another when you were Brad Monroe, 'Mouthpiece to the Stars,' as one pundit had named me.

How did I get to be Mouthpiece to the Stars? In law, timing is everything. I went through law school at Yale. It was supposed to be the best law school in the country, and I planned to be the best criminal lawyer in the country. So after law school, I took a job with a firm in Dallas. Now, Dallas is sometimes called the 'Murder Capital of the World.' It's really not that bad, but it's bad. I was very idealistic when I graduated from law school. I came from back east, and I had the impression that Texas justice was designed to railroad innocent victims onto Death Row. I was going to protect their rights and see that justice was done.

Unfortunately, I began to realize that justice often was being done. Don't get me wrong. I don't believe in the death penalty and I never will, but the felons I was suddenly faced with were often vicious, heartless killers who deserved to be put away (although not killed, I believed). Still, I did my very best to defend them. They were entitled to that.

Then, five years ago, right after I turned thirty, the big break came. A movie producer on location outside Dallas beat the hell out of local prostitute. She died, never regaining consciousness. The DA went for the whole enchilada again: Murder One. I ended up with the case because my firm had hired me out to the producer as a technical expert since the film was to be about a murder trial in a small Texas town. Life began to imitate art suddenly, and instead of advising the actors on trial procedure, I was defending the producer against real charges.

He claimed he left earlier that evening, before the girl was beaten. That explained why his prints were all over her room. The evidence was purely circumstantial, and like most prostitutes, she had more than one john on any number of occasions. The local DA never had a

chance. The word got out about how there I was, a bright young lawyer who had gotten off one of the most notorious hedonists in Hollywood. It turned out everyone back in California thought he did it. Did he? He said he didn't, and that was good enough for me. Even if he had admitted it to me, he was entitled to the best defense I could provide.

Suddenly, I was on every studio's list. If there was big trouble for any star of stage, screen, television or music, call Brad Monroe. If he could get that producer off, he could get anybody off.

Unfortunately, as my professional star was rising, my personal life was in a nosedive. My wife, Brenda, and I had met in college. We were both from the east, both young and idealistic, and both likely to be in the top of our fields. She was two years younger than me, but she was closing in on a doctorate. She had majored in literature, and several universities had put out feelers to her. Her master's thesis was widely read, and her reputation would have netted her a great teaching job except for one thing: she married me.

Dallas isn't a big college town, and teaching jobs were scarce. Her sterling reputation in the east was not as great in Dallas, but we needed her to work at first since starting attorneys aren't rich from the getgo no matter what you've heard. The only job she could find was as an Assistant Librarian in Plano, the Dallas suburb where we settled. The job was beneath her, but she was happy.

We were both happy in those days. Then things started going downhill. First, we found out we couldn't have children. I never blamed her for it. She couldn't help the flaws in her reproductive system, but she blamed herself. She felt it made her less of a woman.

I didn't really notice how it had affected her. I was too busy becoming the Mouthpiece to the Stars. I didn't notice when the drinking started, but start it did. At first, she drank mostly wine. There would be a glass with me and most of a bottle at dinner. Then it would be a glass or two at lunch at the club with her friends. Then it became too much to drink at parties. She was hurting my career. I gave up drinking entirely, hoping she would follow my example. She didn't. It all came to a head

almost three years ago.

I had just won the Andy McConnel rape case. You may remember it. They were calling him another River Phoenix until he was accused of raping a young girl while on location in Italy. The girl was only fourteen, and McConnel was rushed out of the country before he could be indicted. It was up to me to fight his extradition. The girl was alive, but it had been dark when the assailant pulled her into a dark alley and sexually assaulted her. McConnel was seen in a sidewalk bar, and witnesses said he had watched her walking down the street with interest. She went into a store while McConnel paid his tab and left. He was obviously drunk. The girl was seen walking in the direction he had gone minutes later.

It had been dark, I argued, and the girl could only say her assailant “looked like Andy McConnel.” There was no proof. No one had taken semen samples. McConnel may have been too drunk to rape her, and so on. I won as I always did.

I had gone home, happy in my victory to be greeted by Brenda. She had been drinking and could barely stand as I told her of my latest victory.

“So another lowlife is still on the street thanks to you,” she sneered.

“There wasn’t sufficient evidence to extradite him,” I tried to explain.

“That doesn’t mean he didn’t do it,” she countered. “Don’t you ever get tired of helping these animals escape justice?”

“Justice isn’t the only issue,” I pontificated. “What is important is the law. How can there be justice without law? The burden of proof is always on the prosecution. The defendant is always entitled to the best defense...”

“That money can buy!” she finished for me.

“No, that’s not it at all.”

“Quit deluding yourself,” she practically sobbed. “You used to have ideals. You wanted to make a difference.”

“I am making a difference.”

“You are making a mockery of decency. You don’t care if your clients are guilty or not.”

“That isn’t even an issue,” I protested. “Guilty or innocent, I’m required to defend them.”

The argument was an old one. We had had it before, but this time, all of the frustration and resentment bubbled over. She moved out that night and began divorce proceedings the next day.

I suppose I was lucky in a way. She was well off in her own right since her parents had died leaving a substantial amount to their only daughter. I was worth a couple of million on my own by then, but she went after almost nothing. Again, my reputation among my colleagues was enhanced. Brad Monroe had beaten his own wife in a divorce settlement. I said nothing, but the fact was, she asked for very little, and I gave her whatever she asked for. In spite of our problems, I still loved her.

Now I was respected, powerful, wealthy, and single. The combination drew women to me in droves. I was never without female companionship if I so desired. At first, it actually seemed an improvement in my life. What man wouldn’t view a steady diet of women as an improvement? But as the weeks went by, I found myself comparing each of them to Brenda. Many were better looking, for while Brenda was attractive, she was not glamorous. Some (only a few, if the truth be known) were intelligent, but they lacked Brenda’s keen wit.

Many was the time that I almost called her up, but pride always got in the way. I kept thinking that the very next girl I found would be her equal, but she never was. And then, one day almost a year ago, she was gone. She had planned to move back east, to Albany, New York, ever since the divorce. I had heard that through mutual friends. Then, late last fall, she made the move, and I hadn’t heard from her since. I had tried to call her once, but there was no listing for her in Albany. It was apparently unlisted. Since her friends had blamed me for the

breakup and felt I had screwed her over the divorce settlement, I knew better than to call them for her number. They would never give it to me.

"I miss you, Brenda," I said to myself as I soared through the Oklahoma countryside. "I should never have let you go."

I snapped out of my reverie as I pulled the Lexus through a sharply banked curve in the road. It was stupid of me to even think about Brenda. Here I was, on my way to a rendezvous with Talia Moore. I'd be on the cover of a magazine or two after that and be the envy of half the men in America. Maybe Talia would be the one.

I could have driven Interstate 40. It was the most direct route between Oklahoma City and Little Rock, but I knew it was heavily patrolled, and I had no intention of being restricted to the speed limits while driving a GS400. I chose more challenging two-lane roads which wound through the hills of eastern Oklahoma as they slowly became the beginning of the Ozarks. I pushed the car through the straightaway to well over a hundred, never getting even close to its governed top speed of 148, but fast enough that the telephone poles were going by almost too fast to count. I would slow down in the curves, but not enough to miss the sensation of torque as my marvellous machine gripped the road.

It was on a small unmarked section of what I assumed to be a state highway that I saw a white car in my rear view mirror. I couldn't tell from where he had pulled out onto the road. It was almost as if he had appeared from out of nowhere. I had been watching carefully for patrol cars. Perhaps, I thought to myself, it wasn't really a patrol car. That hope was dashed when the dreaded red and blue lights on top of his car began to flash.

Damn! How fast had I been going anyway? I looked down and saw that I had unconsciously brought the car down to a tepid seventy miles an hour, but I must have been doing nearly a hundred when I went past his vantage point. It was time to stop and face the music. With any luck, he would recognize me, at least by name and I would be able to charm him into letting me go with a warning or, at most, a

minor ticket. The last thing I wanted was to be bogged down in some little tank town waiting for some small-time traffic court judge to tell me what a bad boy I had been.

I looked back at the car. A single officer was in the vehicle. As we both stopped by the side of the road, I watched him as he got out of the car. He was tall and slender to the point of being almost thin. His movements were fluid and graceful, almost like a dancer as he approached the car. His eyes were hidden behind the mirrored sunglasses that were always popular in law enforcement.

I rolled down the window and said as charmingly as I could, "Good afternoon, officer."

"Good afternoon, sir," he said formally. "Sir, do you have any idea how fast you were going back there?"

"Well," I said slowly, as if I were giving it some thought as I read the name on his name tag, "I'm not really sure. But you see, Officer... Mercer, is it? Well, Officer Mercer, you see, this is a new car and I'm not entirely..."

"Step out of the vehicle, please, sir."

"Oh, yes, of course. Do you want to see my license and registration?" I asked, climbing out of the car.

"Yes, please."

I handed him my wallet, telling him that the registration was in the center console. He examined both, then looked at me from behind the mirrored glasses. "Sir, do you have any idea how fast you were going?"

"No, I'm sorry, but I don't," I said abjectly. "You see, I was thinking about a case I had been working on, and..."

"You were clocked at ninety-six miles an hour."

I knew he was correct, but I feigned surprise. "I had no idea! Well, Officer, if you'll just give me my ticket, I'll be on my way." Sometimes, when you're willing to accept the ticket, they let you go with a warning.

Maybe I would get lucky.

"I can't do that sir," he replied, the deadpan expression never changing.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said I can't do that, sir," he repeated. "You were thirty-one miles per hour over the speed limit. State law requires me to impound your vehicle and place you under arrest pending trial."

I had no idea what Oklahoma law said on the matter, but my cooperation turned to recalcitrance. "Officer, I'm in no position to be delayed. I'm due in Little Rock in the morning to consult on a very important trial. Detaining me may cause a delay in a court date which would be frowned upon by your superiors, I'm sure."

"The keys, please, sir," he said, ignoring my tirade. "And please get in the vehicle on the passenger side. I'll drive your vehicle."

"I can drive it," I argued. "Otherwise, you'll have to leave your vehicle here."

"That's been taken care of, sir," he answered, nodding to his police cruiser.

I looked up at his car and was surprised to see an officer sitting behind the wheel. Where had he come from? I was sure there had only been one officer in the car. Wordlessly, I handed him my keys and got in the passenger side.

I rode in silence as Officer Mercer drove, his partner driving just behind us. The two officers must have worked together for a long time, I thought, since the two cars seemed to move almost as one, the interval between the cars never changing.

At last, I asked, "How long until I can see the judge? As I told you, I have to be in Little Rock in the morning."

"The Judge won't be back until morning," he told me. "You'll be a guest of the city of Ovid tonight."

Ovid? I had never heard of a town called Ovid. "Surely you don't plan

to keep me in jail until tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll have to do just that, sir,” he said.

“I’ll post bail,” I offered, trying to control my rising fury. I had no intention of being incarcerated, even for one night.

“There’s no judge to grant you a bail hearing,” he explained, “and Oklahoma law requires you to be held until the Judge is available.”

“That’s ridiculous!” I finally exploded. “That can’t be the law. You’re denying due process.”

“I wouldn’t know about that, sir,” he replied innocently. “You’ll have to take that up with the Judge in the morning.”

The rest of the trip was conducted in grim silence. I was quietly fuming, trying to decide my best course of action. It appeared I had no choice in the matter of my confinement. It was afternoon on Sunday. By the time I got hold of anyone who could help me, it would be late evening or maybe even Monday morning. This was going to screw up my schedule for the entire week. I would have to wait until morning and raise hell with this judge he kept referring to. With any luck at all, I would have Officer Mercer’s head on a platter before I left Ovid.

As we drove into the town, I was surprised to find it was much larger than I had expected. It looked like any of a number of small Midwestern farm communities. I estimated the town to be at least ten thousand people, maybe half again that. It was clean and well-maintained, with the usual assortment of small businesses clustered along the highway and a small business district. Most of the downtown buildings were two and three story affairs with retail shops on the first level and offices above.

We pulled up in front of a small complex of buildings with a sign on one of them which proclaimed it to be the city hall. The police department was right next to it. The buildings had that timeless look of modern government buildings, except for the Doric columns framing an area which was probably the city courts. I estimated they were maybe fifteen or twenty years old. Since I was going to be staying at

the Steel Bar Hilton for the evening, I was grateful it wasn't one of the old courthouse jails built back before the Depression. Evenings were cool in Oklahoma this late in the year, and I didn't want to spend the night in a drafty cell which should have been condemned back when Truman was President.

Officer Mercer showed me to my cell and personally brought me a clean shirt, fresh underwear and my electric razor from my bag. That was one advantage of a small town jail. In Dallas, I would never have been allowed personal items in my cell. He even let me keep my briefcase so I could get a little work done.

It appeared as if I had the entire cell block to myself, so it was quiet and clean. Even the bed was fairly comfortable, so my evening wasn't too bad, but I wouldn't have let Officer Mercer know that. He looked in on me a couple of times to be greeted by my best scowl. I seemed to be his only entertainment since I was apparently the only prisoner.

Come to think of it, I mused, I had not met any other police officers. When we had entered the station, there was no one at the front desk. There were no voices coming from any of the offices we passed either. I finally chalked it up to life in a small town. With little crime, probably most of the force took Sunday off to go to church and barbecue in the back yard. Whoever was minding the station had probably been in the back room getting coffee when we came in. At least it would be quiet and I could get some sleep.

I was awaked the next morning by a tapping on the bars. I opened my eyes and turned my head to see Officer Mercer standing there. "It's six thirty," he told me. "The Judge wants to see you at eight, so I got you up so you could take a shower and get some breakfast."

"Yeah, thanks," I muttered. After a shower and dressed in a clean shirt and underwear, I was beginning to feel human again. I thought about asking for a suit, but if I looked too sharp, I wouldn't be able to press home my point to the judge that I had been inconvenienced.

I wondered what the judge would be like. To me, judge was a title, like the banker or the plumber. When Officer Mercer said it, though, it was

as if 'Judge' was the judge's name. Apparently, they only had one judge in municipal court. Maybe I could impress upon him all the people I knew who might be able to get him a seat on a higher court. If I could convince him that I was important enough, he should go easy on me. I'd have to wait and see before trying that, though. If he decided he was hot shit in this burg, I could get myself in deeper by playing the big city lawyer.

Breakfast was served in my cell. I was surprised to see it was like something out of a small town restaurant instead of institutional jail food. It went down pretty good. Even the coffee was hot and fresh. I found myself wondering if Miss Kitty had brought it over from the Long Branch covered in a little gingham napkin. I actually chuckled at the thought.

Officer Mercer led me into the courtroom right at eight o'clock. I was actually surprised at the appearance of the courtroom. The decor was fairly recent and very stately. Walnut wainscoting surrounded the room and the bench was quite imposing for a municipal courtroom. There was only one person seated in the visitor's gallery. She was a very attractive woman with dark blonde hair. In her navy blue suit, I assumed she was probably an attorney waiting for a client for a morning hearing or trial. I smiled at her, and she smiled back. I couldn't get close enough to see if she was wearing a wedding ring. She probably was. I couldn't imagine someone like her staying single very long.

"All rise!" Officer Mercer intoned, acting to my amazement as bailiff as well. That I would have expected in a small town. "Municipal Court for the City of Ovid is now in session, the Honorable Judge presiding."

I wondered if my hearing was going bad. I hadn't heard him announce the judge's name. I must have missed it, I thought.

The Judge (for upon seeing him, he rated the capital 'J') was an impressive figure. With his dark hair just starting to turn to gray and his scholarly beard, he didn't even need his gold-rimmed glasses to look like one of my professors at Yale. His robe was perfectly draped around him, as if he were sitting for the annual picture of the US

Supreme Court Justices.

"Be seated," he intoned. I heard the rustle of a skirt as the blonde sat. Since Officer Mercer at my side remained standing, so did I.

"First case," he ordered as Officer Mercer placed a thin folder in front of him. "Mr. Bradley Monroe, you have been charged with speeding. We're a little short of time around here, so let's just proceed with your sentence."

"Your Honor!" I interjected. "This is not proper courtroom procedure, even for something as relatively informal as municipal court."

"You don't say," the Judge said with a soft Oklahoma twang. "And just what gives you the authority to tell me this?"

"I'm an attorney," I said, almost as if I had said, "I'm Batman." If I had expected the Judge to react to this, I was disappointed.

"I know who you are, Mr. Monroe, but that doesn't give you the right to challenge the procedure in my courtroom. Are you licensed to practice in the state of Oklahoma?"

Actually, I wasn't. I had consulted in the state, but never appeared before the bar. "Not exactly, Your Honor, but..."

"I don't understand 'not exactly,' Mr. Monroe. The only two available responses would seem to be 'yes' or 'no.' Now, which is it?"

"No, Your Honor," I admitted.

"Is it my understanding that you wish to defend yourself against these charges?"

I had been willing to plead guilty, pay my fine, and move on, but the Judge had riled my legal dander. "I do, Your Honor."

To my surprise, he stood and intoned something which sounded like Latin. I picked up a word or two. Every attorney knows a little Latin since so many legal terms are in that language, but I couldn't catch enough words to make any sense of it. Then, he sat down again. Was it my imagination, or had the lights dimmed while he was speaking?

“Very well, Mr. Monroe,” he said, writing something on a slip of paper. He handed the slip to Officer Mercer, who in turn handed it to me.

“This is the name of one of our local attorneys. With her help, you will be given everything you need to practice in this court.”

I looked at the slip of paper. The name ‘Susan Henderson’ was written on it, as well as an address and phone number. “How long should this take, Your Honor?” I asked.

“You will be able to practice in this court by the end of today’s session. Normally, we adjourn at noon, but I’ve had to double up since I’ll be out of town tomorrow. You may appear before me this afternoon at two if everything is in order.”

Two o’clock! What was I thinking? I was supposed to be in Little Rock. Now, I would shoot the entire day here in Ovid. Well, there was nothing to be done about it, I supposed. I would have to see this Susan Henderson and go from there.

“Until two then, Mr. Monroe.”

Officer Mercer escorted me from the courtroom. As we reached the outside door, I stopped him and asked, “Where are you taking me?”

“The Judge wants me to escort you to Ms. Henderson’s office,” he replied.

“I didn’t hear him say anything about that,” I commented.

“Its standard procedure,” he replied from behind his sunglasses.

It wouldn’t do any good to argue, I realized. “All right,” I agreed, “but can I use a phone first? I need to call Little Rock and tell them I’ll be a day late.”

“You can call from Ms. Henderson’s office.”

As I was led out to the police car, I noted another officer with a pair of teenagers dressed very punk. He was leading them into the courtroom. There were two things that struck me as odd, though. First, both teenagers, a boy and a girl, appeared to be almost in a trance, walking in a shuffling step with their eyes looking forward but

apparently not focused on anything. The second thing was that the officer leading them in looked like a virtual clone of Officer Mercer. Before I could get a better look, Officer Mercer nudged me gently into the passenger seat and closed the door.

I rubbed my eyes. It was only nine, and yet this had been a tiring morning. I actually felt a little light headed, and there was a tingling sensation throughout my entire body. I began to wonder if all of this frustration had played havoc with my blood pressure. I worked out frequently to keep in shape and keep my blood pressure down, but maybe Ovid had driven it up. The doctor had warned me it was getting a little high the last time I saw him. I resolved to get a check-up when I got back to Dallas.

We turned on to the main business street, and for the first time, I noticed something which had evaded me the day before. On Sunday, few people will be walking around in the business district of a small town, so I had not seen anyone other than Officer Mercer. Today, though, was Monday, and there were people everywhere going about their business. The problem was that many of them didn't appear to be complete. It was as if I could almost see through them, like a double image in a photograph. Other people—normal people—appeared not to notice anything strange and even stopped to talk with the strange ones.

Before I could ask Officer Mercer about them (although I honestly don't know what I would have asked him), he said. "That's Susan Henderson's car over there."

He was pointing at a Honda Civic diagonally parked in front of a Radio Shack. It looked to be about three years old. Apparently being a lawyer in a small town didn't pay all that well.

"So where is her office?" I asked.

Officer Mercer pointed to the gray stucco building next to the Radio Shack which proclaimed itself to be the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank. "Second floor. The entrance is over there next to the bank entrance."

“Thanks a lot,” I said, not really meaning it as I opened the car door. “Don’t you want to escort me upstairs, just to make sure I don’t skip town?”

“You won’t,” he said so matter-of-factly that I paused to wonder how he could be so sure. “And when you get a minute,” he called after me, “you might want to move the Civic. The meter is expired.”

I turned to ask him why in the world I would want to move someone else’s car, but he had already driven away.

As I climbed the stairs, I found myself hoping Susan Henderson had a good working relationship with the Judge. I needed to get out of Ovid and back to work as quickly as possible. I realized the Judge intended for this woman to be my attorney of record. Then, she could use me in court as a consultant on my own case while she defended me. It would cost me the amount of her fee, but it was preferable to waiting for approval to practice in Oklahoma.

Her office was at the end of the hall toward the front of the building. The door was open, so I went in. It was a two-office suite. The outer office was obviously used as a waiting room with a desk for a secretary/receptionist while the inner office must have been Ms. Henderson’s. It appeared that no one was home and might not have been home for some time. While there were the usual guest chairs and desks and filing cabinets, there were no other signs of life. There were no pictures on the walls or potted plants in the corner or magazines in the waiting area. The secretarial desk was completely devoid of any personal items. There was a computer on it, but the screen was blank.

Then I noticed a telephone on the desk in the inner office. I still needed to call Little Rock, and since no one was home, I didn’t think they would mind if I used the phone. I would reimburse them later. I dialed the number of Mayberry Jessup, the firm in Little Rock where I was already an hour overdue for my appointment. When the receptionist answered, I asked for Henry Mayberry.

“Mr. Mayberry is in a meeting right now,” she told me.

“Yes, I know,” I told her. I had given her my name, but she apparently didn’t connect me with the meeting. “Again, my name is Brad Monroe, and I’m supposed to be in that meeting with Mr. Mayberry.”

“Oh. One moment, please.”

I listened to innocuous background music for perhaps two minutes, growing more annoyed as the seconds passed. At least I heard someone typing on the keyboard in the out office. Apparently, Ms. Henderson’s secretary had just stepped out for a potty break.

“Mr. Monroe?” the voice on the phone asked. To my disappointment, it was the secretary—not Henry Mayberry.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry, but Mr. Mayberry said he did not expect you for this meeting.”

I was suddenly very confused. “But isn’t the meeting to discuss the Nichols case?”

“Yes,” she said hesitantly, as if I had dragged top-secret information out of her.

“Then I’m supposed to be there.”

“Mr. Monroe,” the secretary began in her most imperious tone, “I’m afraid Mr. Mayberry has never heard of you. Now, good day.”

The line went silent. What did she mean he had never heard of me? I had presented a paper at the Arkansas ABA Convention three months ago and met Henry Mayberry then. He had asked me to consult on the Nichols case and we had discussed it by phone at least once a week. This whole thing was starting to make my head spin.

I sat down behind Susan Henderson’s desk. The tingling sensation was stronger, and I was so light headed that I was actually dizzy. The entire room seemed to be going in and out of focus. Then, as I looked at the blank wall in front of me, a picture suddenly formed on it. It was a still life of a very tasteful wildflower arrangement, frame and all. A bookcase suddenly appeared with a little pop as it displaced the air.

As I watched, law books began to appear neatly one by one on the shelves.

I tried to get up, but I found I couldn't. I seemed to have lost partial control of my limbs. I looked down in distress as my clothing seemed to be crawling over my body, like ants at a picnic. My shirt and pants seemed to be reshaping themselves. Then, suddenly, I realized that it wasn't just my clothing. My entire body was shifting as well. I managed to push the chair away from the desk and look down as my pants changed color, from gray to a light tan. Then, the legs of the pants grew short, moving up my legs and fusing into a... skirt?

I looked down at my legs. They were hairless and less muscular, and a thin film of nylon was knitting itself over them. My black oxfords were becoming smaller and more open, and a two inch heel formed on each of them as they changed into a soft brown color.

Something was crawling on my neck. I managed to turn my head to see a fan of light brown hair drift over my shoulders. I could feel the hair growing longer by the second. There was a sharp pin prick on each of my ear lobes, and I felt a sudden small weight on each ear.

I knew what was happening to me. How could I not know? It was impossible; it had to be, but the impossible seemed commonplace in Ovid.

There was an abrupt contraction in my groin, and I knew at once that where my penis and testicles had happily resided moments before, there was now only a feminine slit in their place. Something soft and clinging covered the new anatomy. I crazily wondered what color these new panties were. Breasts were starting to grow under what was now a silky beige blouse with a scoop neckline. A delicate gold necklace looped itself around my neck. The breasts continued to grow. I knew they were not inordinately large—probably only a B cup—but I didn't want to have breasts of any size!

I was now wearing a tan jacket which matched my skirt. On my right wrist, a gold bracelet appeared out of nowhere balanced by a small, feminine watch on my left wrist. My fingernails were actually growing

as I watched them, tapering into points. They weren't terribly long, but they were obviously feminine.

As I was changing, the room was changing as well. A coat rack was suddenly standing in the corner with a woman's trench coat and multi-shaded brown scarf hung over it. Files were appearing on the desk, as were pens and pencils. On a chair near the windows, a brown purse suddenly popped into existence.

Just when I thought the changes had stopped, a pair of glasses appeared on the desk. They had small wire frames and oval lenses. I looked up to see if anything else had changed, but the room was now blurred to my vision. Great, I thought, realizing whom the glasses were for. It wasn't enough for them to change my sex; they had to make me nearsighted as well. With a frightened sigh, I put on the glasses. The world drew back into sharp focus again.

The popping and swishing noises of the changes had stopped, and the only sounds I could hear were the sounds of someone typing in the outer office and the nervous breathing coming from my (my?) own body.

I could move again, but I didn't want to. It was almost as if I thought that as long as I didn't move and feel the movement of breasts and hips, it would all go away. All I had to do was sit still until I woke up from the nightmare. It had to be a dream. There couldn't be a town where all the police officers looked alike and teenagers walked around in a trance and offices rearranged themselves and some people were almost transparent and other people changed sex, could there?

I thought back upon my recent exchange with the Judge. How had he phrased it? He said something to the effect that with the help of Susan Henderson, I would be able to practice—no. What he said was I would be given everything I needed to practice in his court. Everything I needed? A vagina, for example?

I was dealing with a clever man, if 'man' was the right term. There was no doubt in my mind that what had happened to me was the work of the Judge and his minions. Officer Mercer was certainly one of his

cohorts. Were there others? What about the attractive blonde who had been sitting in the courtroom?

I had a court date at two that afternoon. That left me a little over four hours to figure out a strategy. Did the Judge plan to leave me like this? With a sinking feeling, I realized he probably did. I wondered how many other residents of Ovid had been changed by that... creature. But would he leave me a way out—a way to get back to my old life? Maybe he would. I suspected he was playing a game with me. If I won, I would have my old life back, but if I lost, it would be pantyhose and heels for the rest of my life. There was no doubt in my mind that my two o'clock court date would be the most important of my life.

I had to prepare. I needed first to find out as much about who I had become as possible. That might provide some clue as to how to approach the Judge. I got up slowly, balancing for the first time on heels. I had thought it would be no more difficult than walking in cowboy boots, but I was wrong. I was required to walk in an entirely different manner which caused my hips to sway back and forth in what I considered an exaggerated motion. I managed to figure it out pretty quickly. I walked back and forth between the desk and the purse three or four times until I got the hang of it. Still, I wondered how women I knew managed to balance themselves on even higher heels. I hoped I didn't have the chance to find out.

The purse contained the usual collection of garbage all women seem to carry around. There were tissues, credit card receipts, keys, a compact and lipstick. I shuddered when I held the lipstick in my hand. Then, tentatively touching my tongue to my upper lip, I felt an odd taste and realized I was already wearing some of it. I shuddered in disgust. At the bottom of the purse (why is whatever a woman is looking for always at the bottom of a purse?) was a wallet.

I extracted an Oklahoma driver's license and winced at the picture. Was there ever a good driver's license picture? This one had what I could only assume was my new face. It was an attractive face, but falling short of pretty. The gold framed glasses I now wore were posed on the girl's face in the picture. She wore long dangling earrings and

only light makeup. The picture was cropped above the breasts, but she (I still couldn't think of her as me) appeared to be wearing a mauve sweater, very light and feminine. She looked more like a college student than an attorney. I thought she would be more at home picketing the Student Union than arguing in a courtroom. Perhaps this was part of my handicap. Instead of a dynamic attorney like Brad Monroe, I would have to sway a judge in the guise of a neophyte lawyer.

My age was listed as twenty-five, confirming my suspicions that Susan Henderson was a fairly inexperienced attorney. I was five seven, so at least in heels I wouldn't feel like a midget. Hair color was brown, eyes were blue, and the weight was... well, I guess the weight is nobody's business. That was an odd thought, I realized. If someone had asked me the day before what my weight was, I would have proudly told them one seventy-two. At a little over six feet in height, that was a pretty good weight for a man in his thirties, and I would have been proud of it. Now, though, although a quick glance at my body told me I was well proportioned, and if anything, a little on the slender side, it was still a subject I didn't want to discuss.

"Susan?"

I looked up just because I heard someone speak, but I realized in a heartbeat that I was supposed to be Susan, so I replied, "Yes?"

The speaker was a woman, probably early forties with soft brown hair just starting to go gray. She was dressed in a conservative dark blue dress and was fairly attractive in a motherly sort of way. To my dismay, she was also one of the semi-transparent people I had noticed. I realized it must have been her I heard at the keyboard.

"Norman Collier just called," she said, as if I would know whom she was talking about. "He said he is running about fifteen minutes late."

"What time was he supposed to be here?" I asked, pleased that my voice, although feminine, was the type of voice that would be effective in court. I had been afraid I would have a high, childish voice, but this pleasant alto voice would do.

“He was due here at ten,” she said in a voice that told me that I should have known what time he was due.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

I had passed the restrooms on my way in, so I knew where they were. I didn’t have to go (thank God), but I did want to get a preliminary look at my appearance. If I looked as bad as my driver’s license photo... well, let’s just say that if I had to be a woman, I would rather be an attractive one.

With trepidation, I entered the women’s restroom. I felt like a voyeur. If the Judge really wanted to play with me, he would change me back as I entered the restroom and have me picked up on every perversion charge imaginable. I would have gladly taken my chances on that, but when I looked in the full-length mirror along the far wall, I saw the face of a woman. I was relieved to see I was actually fairly attractive. I mean, the cosmetics companies would not have been climbing all over themselves to sign me as a model, but I wasn’t bad. I had that fresh-scrubbed average all-American girl look. I hated it, but if I had to be a girl, I was happy to be a normal looking one.

As far as the details were concerned, my hair was pretty long, flowing about half way down my back. It was as brown as brown can be and looked shiny and healthy. There were small pearls on gold settings hanging from my ears, and my makeup was feminine but a little understated. My lashes appeared naturally long, and I was surprised to note that my glasses actually made them look more alluring, like a picture in a frame.

I looked down my breasts, hoping no one would come in at that moment. I suppose I could make it look like I was adjusting my bra. As I suspected, my breasts were fairly small. I think the term one might use for them would be ‘pert.’ That was fine with me. I had heard too many women with large breasts complain endlessly about how uncomfortable they were. That was one distraction I didn’t need.

Probably my best feature was my legs. They were long and smooth with well-shaped ankles. I felt as if I had forgotten to wear any pants

as I looked at them, encased in that tight tan skirt. I resolved to be careful of how I sat. I would have to keep my legs very close together, as unnatural as that was for me.

All in all, I could have done a lot worse, I realized. I looked feminine without looking dainty; I looked professional without looking butch, and I was attractive enough to feel good about myself without being so stunning that men would be spending an undue amount of time staring at my body. I never stopped to think at the time that these thoughts ran through my head how uncharacteristic they were.

When I got back to the office, a man was waiting for me. He was dressed in a plaid shirt, leather jacket, work pants and boots. And he wasn't transparent. From the look of him, I suspected he was a farmer. I didn't know if he was my appointment, or if I should know him or not, but he solved the dilemma for me when he said, "I'm sorry I'm late, Susan, but I had a little trouble finding everything."

"No problem," I said smoothly, unsure if I should call him Norm, Norman, or Mr. Collier. "Let's go to my office."

As we sat and my secretary offered coffee, which he gratefully accepted, it was time to get down to business. Unfortunately, I had no idea what the business we had to get down to was. Was this our first meeting, or was this part of an ongoing process about which I hadn't a clue? Again, he saved me by saying, "I brought these papers in for you to look at." He placed a neat file folder on my desk.

I opened the file and found several documents pertaining to a property sale with subsequent financing documents. It was easy to see what his problem was. The seller had backed out, refusing to return his deposit, claiming that Mr. Collier had not obtained proper financing in the requisite amount of time. It was a simple case that any first year law student could have handled. I hadn't done property law in years, but I was confident I could help him and told him so. He left, pleased that he had found a competent lawyer to handle his problems. I only hoped that by the time it was actually settled, I would be back in my own life. Let someone else be Susan Henderson.

My appointment had taken almost an hour. I checked with my secretary and found I had no more appointments for the day. That was both good news and bad news. The good news was that I would have time to prepare for my two o'clock trial date with the Judge. The bad news was that if I was stuck in this life very long, I would need more than one appointment a day to pay the rent.

I was wondering idly if I could get in to see the Judge any earlier when an opportunity to do just that presented itself on my doorstep. The opportunity was in the form of a sixteen-year-old boy named Johnny Lavelle.

"Susan?" Dori said (I had finally looked up my secretary's name in her file in my drawer—it was Dori Smithwick). "There's a young man out here without an appointment, but he says it's very important that he see you."

"Okay," I agreed. The young man looked like a high school football player. He was about six-two, in good shape, and handsome (now where had that thought come from?). He was dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt that bore the legend 'Ovid High School.' He muttered his name almost too low for me to hear. Of course, it didn't help that he was busy looking down trying to see down my blouse. This was Johnny Lavelle. After introductions, we sat down and I asked him, "Aren't you a little young to need an attorney on your own?"

"Look," the boy began, "let's cut the bullshit. I know you aren't who you look like and you know I'm not who I look like."

What did he mean? Was it that obvious, or was everyone in Ovid not who they seemed to be?

"Go on," I prodded.

He peered at me. "First, I gotta know, were you a lawyer before, or were you something else?"

I was something else all right, I thought, but I answered, "I was a lawyer. A very good one, too."

"Okay. Now," he said, satisfied, stretching out in the chair, "I'm—or at

least I was a twenty-four-year-old man until I came to Ovid. The Judge, he changed me into a fifteen-year-old kid. He claimed I was driving reckless and endangering people, so he made me fifteen so I could be young enough to take Driver's Ed. He put me in a family of shades and..."

"Excuse me," I said, "but what is a shade?"

He grinned. "Boy, you are new here, ain't you? Shades are like your secretary. They're not real. I mean, you can talk to 'em, though 'em, even screw 'em, but they ain't real."

"But where do they come from?" I asked, genuinely interested.

"How the hell would I know? Now, do you wanna hear my problem or not?"

"Go ahead," I said, really hoping there was a reform school in Ovid.

"So that pig, Mercer, he picks me up for speeding. He said I was doin' fifty in a school zone. What a dork!"

"Did he clock you?"

He shook his head. "You don't know Mercer very good, do you? He don't need no speed gun to tell you how fast you're going. He just knows."

That was a little factoid I filed away for my own defense. "So when is your trial?"

"Noon today."

I shook my head. "Why didn't you come to an attorney earlier?"

"You gotta be shittin' me, lady," he said. I cringed silently as he called me 'lady.' "All the other lawyers in this fucked up town are shades. They'd just do whatever the Judge told them to do. He'd probably make me into a tree like that other guy."

"He turned someone into a tree?" I asked, horrified. There were apparently worse fates than being changed into Ovid's answer to Ally McBeal.

“Yeah. Some pervert. I don’t know the whole story. Mostly, people are afraid to talk about this shit.”

I could understand why, but he seemed to be willing to talk about it, so I asked, “Just who is this Judge anyway?”

A scowl appeared on his face. “That’s one thing we can’t talk about.”

“Why won’t you talk about it?”

“Weren’t you listening, lady?” he snapped. “I said ‘can’t.’ We all figure out who he is, but we can’t talk about it. I figure it’s part of the spell.”

He slumped back in his chair. “So can you get me off?”

“Well,” I began, “if he didn’t clock you, we may have a chance.”

Actually, I was starting to get excited. If this defense worked for this obnoxious teen, it might work for me as well. It was worth a shot.

I got all the pertinent facts from him: the time and place and so on, and at eleven thirty, we left for court.

Susan Henderson’s Honda Civic was not much of a car, but it got us to court in time. I was actually looking forward to this. Even though Johnny Lavelle probably deserved to have the book thrown at him, I thought I had a good chance of beating the rap. We would call Officer Mercer to testify and destroy his testimony since he didn’t have the readings from a radar gun to back him up. This could work.

We entered the municipal building just as Officer Mercer was coming out of the courtroom. He was holding the leash of a very unhappy Basset hound. “Ms. Henderson,” he nodded, ignoring my client. Then, to the dog, he said, “Come on, Sam. Your new master’s waiting.”

The dog looked up at me with sad brown eyes and whined. I could guess he was trying to say, “And you think you have it bad...” I gave an involuntary shudder.

“Jeez,” Johnny muttered, “the Judge is in a piss-poor mood today. You’d better be damned good, lady.”

So help me god, I thought, if he calls me ‘lady’ one more time, I’m going to... going to... what? Hit him with my purse? Beside, lady was

probably the best he could do. After talking with Johnny for a while, I'm surprised he didn't call me a cunt.

When we entered the courtroom, the Judge was nowhere to be seen. I assumed he was in chambers. I was surprised to see Officer Mercer acting as bailiff, though.

"I thought you just left," I said to him.

"I did," was all he said in reply.

The blonde was still there in the visitor's gallery. She was as attractive as ever, but I found to my surprise that I was having some odd thoughts as I watched her. I kept wondering what I would look like if my hair was styled like hers, and where had she gotten that dress? Be careful, Brad, I told myself. These are not thoughts to be thinking. Apparently more than my body had been affected by the change. It was time to get down to business and get my old body back.

"All rise!"

I hurried Johnny to stand next to me at the defense table as the Judge entered the room.

"Be seated," he said without looking at the audience. When he was seated, he looked up at me, one eyebrow raised. "Ms. Henderson, I was under the impression that you would be here at two o'clock. I believe it's just now noon, and I have a trial with Mr. Lavelle."

I stood, trying to look imposing and failing. "Yes, Your Honor," I agreed. "I am acting as legal counsel for Mr. Lavelle."

"Legal counsel?"

"Yes, Your Honor. I believe I am authorized to represent defendants in this court."

The Judge was silent for a moment. Then, he nodded and said, "Very well, Ms. Henderson. I hope you know what you're doing. Your client is charged with speeding. How do you plead?"

I nudged Johnny, hoping he would remember to say what I told him.

"Uh... not guilty, Your Honor."

I breathed a tiny sigh of relief.

“Not guilty!” the Judge said loudly. I could have sworn I heard the rumble of thunder when he spoke. “Officer Mercer picked you up for doing fifty in a school zone. How can you plead not guilty?”

“Your Honor,” I said with a calmness I did not feel, “Officer Mercer did not actually clock my client’s speed at the time of the arrest. Therefore...”

“Officer Mercer!” the Judge interrupted.

“Yes, Your Honor?”

“How fast was this young hoodlum going?”

I tried to break in by saying, “Your Honor, this is not proper courtroom procedure.”

His wrath was suddenly turned on me. “Are you trying to tell me how to run this court, young lady?”

There was that lady word again. “No, Your Honor, but...”

“Then answer the question!” the Judge said to the bailiff.

“He was travelling at exactly fifty-three point six miles per hour,” Officer Mercer recited.

“Good. Then Mr. Lavelle is guilty,” the Judge declared.

“Your... Your Honor,” I stammered, “how can you just take his word for it? I mean, he didn’t have a radar gun.”

“Ms. Henderson,” the Judge said in a condescending tone, “if you would take the time to read our Municipal Code, you would know that the word of an officer is sufficient in this court.”

“But surely that law couldn’t stand up under state laws,” I argued, getting angrier by the minute.

“No, I imagine it couldn’t,” he agreed, “but in Ovid, you don’t just get law; you get justice!”

Many years ago, a Federal judge supposedly told a young attorney,

“In this world, you get law. In the next world, you get justice.”

Apparently, Ovid was closer to the next world. I was in deep shit, and I knew it. It was time to shut up. The Judge was obviously baiting me.

“Yes, Your Honor,” I said meekly, eyes downcast.

Mollified, the Judge went on, “Mr. Lavelle, I had thought that taking Driver’s Education would improve your driving skills. It seems I was wrong. Perhaps you need a little more time to grow up before you get behind the wheel of a car again.”

The Judge stood and began the chanting again I had heard at my own appearance that morning. This time, I was ready for it. I listened closely, but could only pick out a word or two. What little Latin we use in the legal profession is unaccented. This Latin (if it was in fact really Latin) was warmly accented with a flavor that made it sound almost like modern Italian.

Unlike my own situation, this change was almost instantaneous.

Apparently, it didn’t really take any time at all to invoke the spell. I watched as Johnny started to shrink. There was a look of terror in his eyes as he became smaller. I wondered if he was going to disappear entirely, but when he was about two feet tall, the shrinking stopped. His hair was growing longer and weaving itself into two tiny pigtailed with a little pink ribbon on each one. His jeans and sweatshirt turned pink and became a small, frilly dress. White leggings were now on his tiny legs and little white shoes. He—or I suppose I should say she—looked up at me with her pretty little blue eyes and said, “Wady, some wawyer you turned out to be.”

“Officer Mercer,” the Judge said, “would you escort little Lisa Ann home?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

I turned and watched with a mixture of horror and amusement as little Lisa Ann took Officer Mercer’s hand and was led reluctantly from the courtroom. She looked back at me with disgust, and I realized with a start that I had just lost my first case ever. That was a sobering thought since my own turn before the Judge was quickly approaching.

“Ms. Henderson!” the Judge’s voice boomed from behind me.

Reluctantly, I turned to face the Judge. As much as I didn’t want to be Susan Henderson, I was beginning to realize that my fate was a pleasant one compared to becoming a three-year-old girl or a dog or a tree. I was somewhat relieved, though, when I saw that the anger had left his face. He looked serene and compassionate, the perfect model of a modern judge.

“Ms. Henderson,” he began in an almost fatherly tone, “I actually admire your spirit. It took a lot of courage for you to try to defend that little rat in this court. You still don’t seem to understand how the system works here in Ovid, though.”

He paused for a moment, as if waiting for me to reply. I thought better of it, though, and continued to give him my best contrite, attentive look. I hoped that it was the right look. After all, I wasn’t used to this face. He seemed satisfied and continued, “Instead of our two o’clock session, perhaps we can come to some agreement now. You are qualified by virtue of your current identity to practice before this court, so have you prepared your defense?”

I had, but I realized it would be as unproductive as my defense of Johnny—or rather Lisa—Lavelle. Think fast, Brad, I told myself, or it’s pantyhose and purses for the rest of your life.

“Your Honor,” I said finally, “may I approach the bench?”

“By all means.”

I walked with as much dignity as I could muster in unfamiliar heels to the bench and said, “Your Honor, I don’t understand all of this, but I do understand that a usual defense of my case would result in my loss.”

“That is the most astute thing you have said to me yet, young lady.” There was that ‘lady’ word again.

“Then I would like to plea bargain. I will admit to my guilt in the speeding case in return for a sentence which will allow me to regain my old life. Is that acceptable to the court?”

At least, I had him thinking about it. He appeared deep in thought for a

moment, his eyes never leaving mine. Then, his eyes widened for an instant. "Ms. Henderson, I believe I have something in mind which will satisfy us both."

"Yes, Your Honor?"

"I will accept your plea, and grant you a sort of probation. The terms of your probation will be as follows. You will remain as Susan Henderson for exactly one week. During that time, you will act at all times as the woman I have made of you. You will dress, speak, and behave in a manner appropriate to your current identity. You will, however, have to maintain a high moral tone. This is a small town, and we espouse decent family values. You may not engage in sexual relations with anyone, male or female, for this period. The definition of sexual relations we will use in this case will be the old 'penetration, no matter how slight' which has been a standard for many years."

Actually, that was subject to some recent interpretation, but I knew what he meant. It was a safe bet, though, because I had no intention of engaging in sexual relations while in this body.

"Furthermore," he continued, "I want you to demonstrate to me your fitness to practice in this court in accordance with the rules of conduct I have established. Make trial that you may know. You must within a week argue and win a case before me. I assure you, in spite of what you are probably thinking, that it is possible to do."

"Now, if you are able to do these things in a satisfactory manner, and appear before me next Monday at nine o'clock, I will return you to your old life as you have requested. Are you willing to accept this probation?"

What choice did I have? "I am, Your Honor."

"Very well. Then final judgement shall be set aside until next Monday at 9 AM. Case is continued until that time." There was a sharp rap of his gavel. I was dismissed.

As I picked up my purse, the Judge called out to me, "One other thing, Ms. Henderson. I would advise you to read two things before we meet

again. The first is the *Ovid Municipal Code* and the second is Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*."

"I will, Your Honor," I said, but I was puzzled. I understood why he would want me to read the *Ovid Municipal Code*, but of what value was a Shakespearean play? I had never cared much for the Bard, but if the Judge thought it would help, I would have to find a copy of it.

I got back to the office just before one, tired and hungry. I was depressed from losing in court, an entirely new experience for me in either gender. My feet hurt from being in heels, and the muscles (such as they were) in my legs were tired from trying to balance on those tiny heels. The bra was rubbing on the bottom of my breasts, and my panties felt like they were trying to crawl up inside me, both front and back. My neck even hurt from the weight of my hair, and I kept having the feeling there was something crawling on the bottom of my ear lobes every time my earrings moved. To make matters worse, I had to go to the restroom and I didn't particularly want to experience that as a woman. Still, if I was going to be one for a week, I would have to go sometime, and my body was telling me that sometime was very soon.

"How did it go?" Dori asked me in a tone so cheery that I wanted to kill her. Could you kill a shade? I suspected you could.

"I lost," I mumbled.

"Oh, you poor dear," she said rushing over to put her arm around me. "Well, you'll win the next one."

I hoped so. I almost said, "Thanks, Mom." I couldn't imagine anyone in my old office acting so concerned about a loss. They would probably be hiding out. Whenever one of my associates had a bad day back in Dallas, it didn't pay to be very visible in the office. I would have to change that when I got back. I liked Dori's approach better.

"Thanks, Dori," I said with a small smile I didn't feel. "Is there anything to eat around here?"

"I'll order us a couple of salads from the Greenhouse," she said. Oh, great—rabbit food. "Do you want your usual?"

“Sure,” I said, dropping my stuff in my office.

The restroom was my first chance to really relax for a few minutes. I squatted on the toilet and just forced myself to relax. To my surprise, I felt a flow of liquid from my new plumbing. That was all there was to it, it seemed. It really wasn't that much of a different sensation as a woman. The best I can describe it is that as a man, it's like using a hose and as a woman, it's like emptying a bucket. I could live with it for a week. Carefully and tentatively, I wiped myself as I knew I was supposed to. I hoped I did it right, I thought. What I had done was just let my mind go for a minute and do it the way it seemed right. Maybe I had a few basic skills built in. It was the first time I had had the opportunity to touch my vagina. I thought about what the Judge had said about no sex. That really wouldn't be a problem. Even I wasn't anxious to touch myself there, and I certainly wasn't going to let a man touch me.

Back in the office, I spent the afternoon poring over the *Ovid Municipal Code*. It seemed pretty straightforward, very much like most city codes. The only thing which threw me a little was at the beginning of the document where it said, “Moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.” Where had I hear that before? Wherever it was, it suited the Judge to a T.

After I had eaten my salad, I began to settle into a routine I knew I would have to suffer for the next few days if I was ever to return to my old life. I didn't have many clients, and those I did have had fairly easy legal needs. I saw two clients in the afternoon, both walk-ins, and each had problems I was able to help them with without the need of going to court. I began to long for another Johnny Lavelle. At least, he was interesting, the little shit.

The good thing is that I wasn't feeling so strange any more. I thought this was because I was busy being a lawyer. Male or female, I was doing the same job. Now, if I had suddenly been forced to be a waitress or a teacher or a housewife, I would probably felt more alien, but there were as many women graduating from law schools now as men, maybe more. I didn't exactly feel like a woman; I felt like a

lawyer.

Five o'clock rolled around, though, and I would have to stop being a lawyer for awhile and spend the evening alone as a woman. I wasn't looking forward to it. I said good-night to Dori and promised to lock up. I had survived my first day as Susan Henderson. One day down and six to go. All I had to do was act the part and win a trial with the Judge. The first part I could do with a little discipline. It was the second part that worried me. I needed a case to go to trial almost at once. I resolved to drop by the municipal offices in the morning and see what was coming up on the court schedule.

I found my apartment without too much trouble. Ovid wasn't that big, so I just looked at my driver's license to get the address and checked the map of Ovid in the back of the phone book. Small towns aren't much for building apartments, but Ovid had a small college, and there were several small apartment buildings catering to students and faculty around it. My apartment was in a small complex with about a dozen units, located a block south of the campus. I had to admit, the five-minute commute beat the forty-five minute one on the Central Expressway I tolerated in Dallas.

My apartment was feminine, but not overtly so. There were a few more frills and pastels around, but no more than I had experienced when Brenda had been with me. I slipped out of my skirt, blouse and hose and climbed into a sweat suit and sweat socks. I felt almost normal again. Not quite, but almost normal.

I spent a boring evening by myself. I fixed a quick dinner. Fortunately, the pantry was full, and being a bachelor for the three years since Brenda had been gone had forced me to either eat out or become a decent cook. I had chosen the latter, since I knew my waistline would not stay firm if I ate out all the time. I had a simple salad, a chicken breast, and a baked potato (no butter). It was pretty standard fare for me, and this female body seemed to like it fine.

The rest of the evening, I spent looking through drawers and closets, trying to familiarize myself with all the things I would need to know for the next six days. I didn't put it past the Judge to have a trick up his

sleeve. I didn't want to show up Monday morning and find out his idea of acting like a woman for a week included something I hadn't done. I would have to dress and act like the young woman lawyer I was. I had no doubt that any being who could change my sex so easily could be spying on me right now.

The only thing I had to soul search on was in the bathroom. I found a small container of pills which I recognized were birth control pills. As I had said before, I had no intention of needing them, but perhaps this was the trap the Judge had set for me. If I didn't take them, I wasn't really getting into the spirit of the thing. You weren't acting like a woman. Sound the buzzer. You lose. Next contestant, please. I found the pill in the slot marked 'Monday' and reluctantly swallowed it.

Tired from my ordeal, I went to bed early. I found a pair of pajamas, which looked relatively unfeminine if you ignored the little red roses printed all over them, and went to bed. It had been a dull evening, in spite of my time spent investigating my new and (hopefully) temporary life. But it wasn't just dull, I reflected, closing my eyes. I was lonely. In fact, if I was honest with myself, I had been lonely for a long time. At first, I had Brenda to spend my evenings with. Then, as we drifted apart, there was my work, which often kept me working very late. After Brenda, was gone, my work continued, often punctuated with short, shallow relationships with a number of women. Even if I hadn't come to Ovid, my relationship with Talia Moore would probably have been over almost before it started. She wasn't the right woman for me, I thought as I drifted off to sleep. She wasn't Brenda.

I awoke at six on Tuesday, oddly refreshed. I knew at once who I was and where I was, so there was no sudden shock. I always woke up that way, and being Susan didn't seem to have changed that. I did feel ten years younger, though, and then I remembered that I was ten years younger. I resolved to go running that evening. It would be interesting to see if the ten years and more than fifty pounds I had shed improved my running.

Dressing proved a chore, as I was afraid it would. Still, I managed to do a respectable job with my makeup. I had watched Brenda do her

makeup a number of times, so I had some idea how to do it. It took a couple of times, particularly the eyes, but I managed. In fact, I thought I actually looked a little more alluring than I had the day before, for what that was worth. I have to admit, though, that if I just relaxed, my hands seemed to know what to do without any conscious thought. Still, I was proud of my efforts.

I managed to get all the tangles out of my long hair and get my bra fastened without ripping off a breast. Picking a dress for the day wasn't that hard either. I picked a nice dark blue skirt and matching jacket, a white blouse, and black heels, about the same height that I had worn the day before. Getting new earrings in took a few minutes, but I managed. By seven thirty, I had eaten a light breakfast and was ready to go. I was actually looking forward to the five-minute commute. Day two was underway. After today, only five more days to go.

I got to the office, exchanged morning pleasantries with Dori, and looked over my calendar. I had two appointments for the day. Surely one of them would involve some court time. The first appointment wasn't until ten, so I headed for the Judge's office to see what his court schedule looked like.

The receptionist told me that the Judge was not in. I remembered that he had said something about that when I was in court. She then said, "But Cindy is in, so she can help you."

"Thanks," I replied. "Where is her office?"

The receptionist looked at me oddly, as if I should have known the answer. "It's down that hall, right next to the Judge's office."

"Thanks again," I said with my best smile.

I was more than a little surprised to find the blonde from the courtroom was apparently Cindy. She looked up and saw me, then smiled. "Hi," she said softly, rising and offering me her hand. I took it, startled that her hand and mine were about the same size. "I'm Cindy Patton, the Judge's secretary."

“Uh... I’m Susan Henderson,” I said, playing the role as best I could.

Cindy laughed, “You don’t have to pretend when you’re here with me. The Judge just expects you to act like a woman. I know who you were, of course. As far as most people around here think, you and I are old friends. We even went to high school together.”

“We are? We did?” No wonder the receptionist was surprised that I had to ask for directions.

“Yes,” she replied, “that’s the way things work around here. When you change, you’re given a complete life. I know what’s supposed to be happening since I have to follow it all for the Judge.”

“Then you’re like him?” I asked.

She laughed her musical laugh once more. “Oh, no, I’m a changee just like you. Just about everybody who’s real in Ovid was changed, but most of them don’t remember it. They think they’ve always been here.”

“Who were you before?” I asked.

“I’ll warn you, Susan, that isn’t considered a polite question in Ovid,” she admonished me.

“But why not?” I asked, genuinely puzzled. “You know who I was.”

Cindy sighed, “Well, for openers, it affects how we relate to each other. Let’s say that I told you that I used to be a four-hundred pound Sumo wrestler, which I wasn’t by the way. That would affect how you talked to me and acted around me. It wouldn’t be a natural way to act around a woman like me. Do you see?”

“I suppose,” I admitted. “It’s all pretty complicated.”

“Well, you’ll get used to it.”

I shook my head, feeling my long hair drift around me. “I hope not. I still have a chance to get back to my old life.”

“That’s right, you do,” she agreed. “I imagine that’s why you’re here today—to look for a good case to defend.”

“That’s right. Can you help me?”

She smiled. “Sure. Always glad to help out an old high school classmate.”

I smiled back. “Thanks, Cindy,” I said, getting into the spirit of the thing. “You’ve always been a great friend.” We laughed together. I think it was the first time I had felt like laughing since I had come to Ovid.

We looked at the court calendar. The Judge was out of town that day, but court was scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday, but not Friday. There were a couple of mundane trials and an arraignment on Thursday, but nothing else. “Then I can schedule a trial for any other time?” I asked Cindy.

“Not necessarily.”

Oh-oh, I thought. The Judge plays games with the schedule. “Why not?”

“Well, people like you get brought to court on pretty short notice. Anyone who gets picked up today will have to appear tomorrow, and if court is in session, they’re brought in for judgement immediately.”

“Well, how about one of them? Couldn’t you just give me a call and I could defend one of them?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think that would be a good idea, Susan.”

I winced at the name, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“People who are brought in for that kind of judgement are going to become citizens of Ovid, and there’s nothing you or any other attorney can do to stop that. You see, the Judge knows what they’ve done, and they’ve all done something. Usually it’s some traffic offense, like yours, but sometimes, it’s more serious. This place is sort of a speed trap in the Twilight Zone. All you’d do is lose another case like you did yesterday.”

I saw her point, but that did nothing to help me. How was I going to find a case to try before the Judge on such short notice? I had only

two days to find a client, gather all the information, and get a trial appearance scheduled. The bastard had stacked the deck against me! I wouldn't be able to do it, and would be stuck as Susan Henderson for the rest of my life. In frustration and rage, I felt the most unnatural urge to cry.

Cindy saw my distress and put a comforting hand on my shoulder. I was learning that women touch each other a lot more than men. I found myself envying her. She was comfortable as a woman. I suspected she had always been one, though. I wonder what she would think if she suddenly found herself in the body of a man.

"Look," she said softly, "I'll do what I can for you. I'll check around with Officer Mercer and see if he knows of any locals who need a lawyer. If there needs to be a trial on any of them, I'll schedule it in. But that may be a long shot, so keep working on it yourself."

"I will," I said, trying to smile and hold back the tears at the same time.

I got back to my office in time for my ten o'clock appointment, but there was nothing to take to trial there. It was just two shades who were a married couple wanting to set up a simple will. My two o'clock wasn't much better. It was an elderly woman (and a shade) who wanted to set up a trust for her grandchildren. I wondered to myself if they were shades, too, or if they were scampering around the school playground unaware that they had been adults only a short time before.

That was it for the day. It was nearly four and I was no closer to a trial than I had been that morning. I called Cindy, but it had been a slow day for our ever-busy police officer. There had been no new arrests and there was nothing pending. Apparently the Judge liked an orderly little town. What this town needed was more Johnny Lavelles.

I was getting depressed. It was looking more and more as if I would be in skirts for the rest of my life. Then, at about four thirty, Dori popped in the office. "There's a young man who would like to see you right away. He just called and is driving over now. He said he could be here in ten minutes. I told him it would be all right, since he sounded very upset. I

hope I did the right thing.”

“I’m sure you did, Dori,” I told her with a confirming smile. A client was a client. Even if it wasn’t something I could take to court right away, if I ended up stuck as Susan Henderson, struggling young lawyer, I might need every client I could get. That Honda Civic had a lot of miles on it, and the rent needed to be paid, I was sure.

The young man Dori spoke of showed up, good to his word, ten minutes later. He was about my current age, and I found myself thinking he was quite attractive. Apparently my new hormones were kicking in, much to my chagrin. He was about six foot one with brown eyes and dark brown hair cut fashionably short. He appeared to be in good shape, but wasn’t muscle-bound by any stretch of the imagination. He was wearing gray slacks, a lighter gray herringbone sport coat and a dark blue turtleneck. And like me, he was wearing glasses.

“I’m Steven Jager,” he said in a soft, mellow voice as he offered me his hand.

I rose and took it, feeling very tiny as his larger hand surrounded mine. “Susan Henderson,” I said.

“I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice,” he said, taking the seat I had motioned him to. “I just didn’t want to let this wait until tomorrow since it was so upsetting.”

“Please tell me about it,” I urged. Could this be the case I was looking for?

“Well,” he began, “I teach English at Capta College. This is my second year on the staff.”

Somehow, I wasn’t surprised that he was a college instructor. He looked every bit the part. “Are you tenured?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No, the agreement I have is year to year. I won’t be up for tenure until I’ve been there five years, and as it stands right now, I may not be there another five days.”

“Why is that?” I asked. I could sense a case coming up.

“Two of my freshman English students, both young girls have accused me of sexual harassment,” he said, his face turning beet red. “Well, actually, only one has, but the other one is backing her up.”

Two emotions coursed through me at the same time. The first was sympathy for this man. He didn’t look like someone who would sexually harass his students. Of course, I was still looking at him from a predominately-male perspective. If I had been a woman all my life, I might have thought differently. Still, he looked shy and gentle—certainly not like a sexual aggressor.

The other emotion was disappointment. This didn’t look like a crime under the *Ovid Municipal Code*. Oh, I might be able to take it there if there was no other court to handle it (and I suspected that there were no other courts available to the residents of Ovid), but that would take time. I couldn’t force that before my deadline. But, as I had said to myself earlier, I might soon need every client I could get.

“Did you?” I asked.

He looked at me blankly. “Did I what?”

“Did you sexually harass her?”

He straightened up so fast I thought his backbone would snap.

“Certainly not! I couldn’t dream of such a thing.”

I pulled out a pen and legal pad. “Why don’t you tell me the whole story?”

He was embarrassed, I could tell. That was actually a good sign. In spite of what most people believe, the guilty are often the most confident. They can look you right in the eye and deny they ever did anything wrong. As often as not, the innocent are the ones who are nervous and embarrassed. They know they don’t deserve the accusations, but they are unnerved because others do believe they are guilty. Steven’s embarrassment was a small indicator of innocence. I found myself happy about that. I liked what little I had seen of him, and I wanted him to be innocent.

“Judy Walker and Audrey Bertram are in my beginning English class,”

he began. "They're both pretty good students. They're not A material, but they have strong B grades and participate well in class. They seem to be good friends since they always come to class together, usually giggling and talking like old friends. Then, about a month ago, Judy started hanging around asking questions. I didn't think much of it, but she was always the last student to leave."

I was taking notes furiously. "Did she seem to hang back so she was always the last student to ask a question?"

Steven thought for a moment before replying, "Now that you mention it, yes. She would hang back from the other students and then ask me questions when we were alone."

"Were you alone in your office?"

He shook his head. "No, only in the classroom."

"Was the door open?"

"Yes."

"Did she ever make any advances at you?"

"I don't think so. It's actually a little hard for me to tell."

"Are you gay?" It was a question I had to ask. How could he not notice if she was making advances? I found myself hoping he wasn't gay, although it would have made his defense easier. I wondered why I cared.

He smiled. I thought that was odd. Most men would protest vehemently, even some who really were gay. "No, I'm not gay."

I shifted forward in my chair and looked him straight in the eye. "Then why is it so hard for you to tell? You're an attractive man. Surely other girls have come on to you before."

He looked a little startled. "Do you really think I'm attractive?" he asked.

Did I? "Well..." I managed, "...yes."

We were both silent for a moment. I didn't know why he was silent, but

I knew why I was silent. I had just told a man I thought he was attractive. I mean, it wasn't a come on; it was just a statement of fact from an attorney to his—rather her—client. Still, it was odd that I even noticed. Like many men, I had never been able to tell if another man was good looking or not. It just wasn't something straight men looked for in another man.

Flushed, I tried to get the discussion back on track. "So have girls come on to you before?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well, yes, but I'm not the kind of person to take advantage of that. I mean, I'm a little old to be chasing after eighteen-year-old students."

"You don't look that old," I pointed out. "What are you? Twenty-six?"

"Twenty-eight actually," he said. Then, looking me straight in the eye, he added, "Now."

My heart jumped. He was like me; he remembered his previous life. "So you remember who you were," I concluded.

He nodded. "Yes, and from your statement, so do you."

"Then is there anything in your previous life that might help us?"

"No," he said. "It wouldn't be allowed anyway. By the way, I suppose I should ask if you are really an attorney. You act as if you might be new around here."

"Yes, I am. I'm new around here and I am an attorney," I told him. "I was an attorney before I came here, and I was a damned good one. Now, what do you mean by 'it wouldn't be allowed'?"

"Well," he began, "we can talk about who we were here in private, but if you try to talk about it around more than one other person, you'll find you can't say a thing. It's like a safety valve. If we couldn't talk about it among ourselves, we'd probably go crazy, but if we talked about it around a group of people, particularly the ones who don't know they've changed, we could upset the entire social system here in Ovid."

It made sense in a perverse sort of way. Many dictatorships had operated on the principle that two people was a conversation and three people was a revolution. Ovid was certainly an odd form of a dictatorship, albeit an apparently benevolent one.

“So what you’re saying is you have no interest in college girls,” I concluded. “What kind of girls are you interested in?”

Now what made me ask that? It wasn’t something I really needed to know, but I found that some strange part of me wanted to know the answer. I leaned forward to hear his response.

“I guess I really haven’t thought much about that,” he replied after a moment’s thought. “First, there was the change that turned me into Steven Jager, and then, I had to establish myself in a new role. It’s a demanding job, really, and I enjoy it. I want to be tenured and stay at Capta College for the rest of my life.”

“Be careful of that,” I warned him quietly. “Getting too wrapped up in your career can be very costly in your personal life. I know.”

He looked at me in silence for a moment; then said, “I believe you do.”

“Well,” I said, somewhat flustered, “I think we need to get back on track. What does this girl claim you did?”

“She said I took her back to my office and made sexual advances to her after class yesterday,” he replied hesitantly.

“What did happen?”

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “We did go back to my office. That much is true. She got very close to me and asked me what I thought of her. I told her I thought she was a good student and I was pleased to have her in my class. She asked me if that was all, and I told her it was. She seemed disturbed by this and left.”

“Did anyone see the two of you in your office?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Was your office door open?”

“Yes. I never close it.”

Either he was a polished liar or so naive that he couldn't understand what had happened to him. He seemed so innocent and unsuspecting that I was beginning to think he was telling the truth. That had never been very important to me before, but there was something about this man that made me genuinely want to believe him.

“How did you find out about the accusation?”

“I was called into the Dean's office earlier this afternoon. He told me what had happened, and that the College's Board of Trustees wanted me to appear before the Moral Review Committee on Saturday.”

“This Saturday?”

“Yes.”

That meant even if I did find a case to argue before the Judge, I would still be here to defend Steven before the Committee. That actually made me happy. I felt he was being railroaded. Apparently, even in Ovid, political correctness was out of hand. It was so much easier for an organization like the College to punish an individual like Steven than find out what had really happened. It made my blood boil.

“Okay,” I told him. “I will defend you at the meeting on Saturday, but I'll warn you, it won't be easy. We have a lot of work ahead of us.”

We spent over an hour examining every possible detail of the situation. We discussed how well the girls responded in class, what the subject of their papers had been, who their other friends were, what they wore to class. I began to form a mental picture of the two girls. First, they were both shades. Did this mean shades could act independently, or was someone pulling their strings? Assuming for the moment that they were acting independently, why were they doing this? Was it to attract attention? Was it to get revenge for a perceived slight? My next step would be to interview the two girls. I suspected that Judy would stick to her story no matter what, but perhaps I could do something with Audrey.

Steven suddenly leaned back and groaned, “I can't think on an empty

stomach. Are we about finished?”

I looked down at my notes. “We are finished for tonight. I’m tired, too. I need to interview both girls before we can do anything else.”

“Okay, fine with me.” He looked at his watch. “Are you leaving now? If so, I’ll walk you to your car.”

I looked up at him in puzzlement. “Why should you do that?”

His face turned red. “Well, it is dark out, and a young woman alone on the street... it’s just not a good idea.”

I hadn’t thought of that. Most women I knew did not like to go out in the dark to their cars. Of course, Dallas, like all major cities, could be a dangerous place at night, even for men, but I never stopped to consider that I should take precautions in Ovid. “Do you think it’s necessary?”

“Probably not,” he admitted, “but it’s still a good idea.”

“Well...”

His face brightened. “Say, I have an idea. Why don’t we go over to Rusty’s? I’ll buy you a burger.”

My clients had never been my friends, and I always tried to maintain a discrete distance from them outside legal issues. This is just good common sense, since most ethical rules for attorneys stipulate that there should be no relationship with a client which might prevent a lawyer from doing his or her best for the client. I had always subscribed to that rule. But did that mean I couldn’t have dinner with a client? Certainly, if I had been male, I wouldn’t have thought twice about a conflict just because I had a burger with him. But now, things were different. I was a woman and he was an attractive man (there was that odd thought again).

I decided it wouldn’t be a conflict. After all, a going to a place called Rusty’s for a burger hardly seemed like a romantic evening. Besides, I was hungry and I didn’t like eating alone. “Okay,” I agreed.

“Great! I’ll drive us over and then drop you off back at your car after

dinner.”

I readily agreed since I didn’t have the foggiest notion where this Rusty’s was.

Steven drove a Volvo. I filed that fact away, too. If he had driven a Corvette or some other flashy car, it would have said something about the type of man he was. It didn’t necessarily mean that he was on the make just because of the car he drove, but it was a potential indicator. Volvos aren’t exactly babemobiles, and Steven’s looked to be several years old. It somehow made him seem even more professorial.

Rusty’s proved to be exactly what I thought it would be. It was a small burger joint out on the highway where all the car dealers, gas stations, and fast food joints were located. The neon sign proclaimed ‘Rusty’s Best Burgers’ under a smiling neon bull. The sign was so large, it almost threatened to dwarf the white stucco café beneath it where the words ‘Rusty’s Burger Barn’ were printed in fading red paint.

Inside, the dining room was brightly lit with only a few customers parked in the row of booths by the window. I suspected this place did most of its business on weekends and in the summer when the high school kids could stay out later. An attractive young brunette in a tight-fitting waitress’s uniform was at our table almost before we were seated. She was a shade.

“Hi, Mr. Jager,” she said with a wide smile. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“You know the life of a college instructor, Maxine,” he said, returning the smile. “Busy all the time. No time to eat.”

She laughed, “Then you’ll have to make up for it tonight. What will you have, folks?”

We ordered burgers, fries, and I had a Diet Coke while Steven had a vanilla shake. When the waitress left, I asked, “Is she a friend of yours?”

“As in a girlfriend of mine?”

I smiled.

“You never stop working, do you?”

“Not if I want to win,” I replied.

“Is that what’s most important to you?”

“It’s pretty important,” I replied, but I wasn’t sure if it was still the most important thing to me. If someone had asked me that a few days ago, I would have said yes, but now I wasn’t sure. Maybe losing that little case with Johnny Lavelle had taught me that even when you lose, life goes on. If I had been a little less intense in my career, I might have won as many cases as I did, but I might still have Brenda.

“To answer your question, she was in one of my classes last year. She’s working on a degree in psychology.”

“She seems to like you,” I noted.

Steven frowned slightly. “Does that mean we must have something going on? Just because she likes me?”

I put my hand over his in a gesture that seemed somehow natural.

“I’m sorry, Steven,” I said softly. “I didn’t mean to offend you. It’s just that some people might think that if they saw you talking to her. She’s young and pretty, and given the accusations against you, a lot of people might think just that.”

“But I can’t ignore girls like Maxine,” he protested. “They’re my students.”

“I know,” I agreed. “Just be aware of appearances.”

The burgers came, and they were great. I couldn’t eat all of mine, though, but Steven devoured every bite of his own burger as well as half of my fries. We talked about the College mostly. It was a small liberal arts school with only about two thousand students. It had apparently originally been a denominational school, but that had changed. Steven wasn’t sure when. The president was a woman named Betty Vest.

“You’ll meet her Saturday,” Steven said.

Steven dropped me off at my car and waited until I had started it and

put it in gear before driving away. We had set up another meeting for the next day right after lunch since he had a free period then. I was going to try to interview Judy and Audrey before then.

I got home tired but somehow in a good mood. I was no closer to solving my dilemma than I had been the night before, but I was busy again. Actually, it was more than that, I realized. It had been a long time since I had represented someone in an important case whom I really liked. There was something about Steven that I really liked. It was as if he were vulnerable and I could protect him.

As I got ready for bed that night, I was actually happy. I had broken my rule about clients. I had made a friend.

The next thing I knew, it was six in the morning again. I got up and started my morning routine of getting a shower and getting dressed. It actually was a routine now. Although it was only my second morning in the body, it was far easier than the previous morning. Oh, the shower was still a challenge. It was a terrible temptation to fondle myself. My male mind found this body very attractive, and fondling it would have been natural, but I wanted to keep myself as chaste as possible. Perhaps I feared that I might enjoy self-stimulation a little too much. If I wasn't able to get back to my own body, I might try experimenting, but the goal for now was to return to my old life.

Susan's wardrobe was mostly lawyerly suits, for which I was thankful. I would have been very uncomfortable in less tailored attire. Still, the suits were feminine, even the charcoal gray one I had donned for the day. And the addition of hose, gray heels and a ruffled white blouse were certainly not examples of masculine attire. But when in Rome...

I phoned Dori and told her I was going immediately to the Judge's office. Then, I downed a slice of toast and a glass of orange juice and started off for another day.

Cindy greeted me warmly and offered a cup of coffee, which I accepted. I really was starting to think of her as a friend. When I had taken a drink of the coffee, I asked her, "Is there anything coming up for trial today?"

She looked at me with sympathetic eyes and said, "Susan, I'm afraid not. The Judge has been called out of town for the rest of today."

My heart sank. I was running out of time. I had to find a case to try or I was Susan forever. "Is he coming in to the office at all?" I asked.

"Yes I am," a voice said from behind me. It was the Judge. He looked at me for a moment and told me, "Come in. I can only give you a few minutes. I do have to go."

I followed him in and took the proffered seat. Without preamble, I began, "Your Honor, as you can see, I'm trying to meet the terms of my probation. In dress and manner, I have displayed the feminine attributes you required, but I can't argue and win a case before you if there is nothing on the docket for me to do."

"That isn't my problem," he said laconically. "It's your problem. I never promised you a case. You could always go find one on your own."

"You set me up," I accused. "You knew there wouldn't be a trial for me to conduct. You plan to beat me on a technicality—no possible case, no win."

To my surprise, he actually smiled. "A technicality? You mean like when you got that soundtrack composer off for molesting little girls?"

"The prosecution stepped over the line with my client," I explained, feeling my face flush. "They didn't follow proper procedure."

"So, thanks to you, a dangerous pervert escaped justice."

I shifted uncomfortably. "He was caught a year later in London. They imprisoned him there, so I'd say justice caught up with him."

"No thanks to you," the Judge pointed out. "I only wish he had come through Ovid. We need more oak trees in the park."

I shuddered. At first, I thought it was at the thought of being turned into a tree, but then I realized that I had pictured the composer in my mind. He was a sick man who should have been put away sooner. By getting him off, I had been partially responsible for the molestation of at least three other girls whom he had attacked after I got him off. I

had never really thought of it that way before. I was suddenly not very proud of myself, but I pressed on, "My past cases aren't the issue. I know I can win a case if I have more time."

"You have no more time," he said sternly. "You are to appear in my courtroom at nine o'clock next Monday. If you haven't met all the terms of your probation by then, you will be sentenced to be Susan Henderson for the rest of your natural life."

He said it as if it were a life sentence. I suppose it really was.

"Now, that's all the time I can give you this morning. I have to be in Tulsa in fifteen minutes."

Fifteen minutes? But Tulsa was at least an hour and a half away. But I supposed that would not be a problem for the Judge. He rose from behind his desk and walked into the outer office. I turned to follow him, but he was already gone.

"Where did he go?" I asked Cindy.

"Tulsa," she replied.

"Yes, I know he's going to Tulsa, but where is he right now?"

She smiled. "Oh, he's already there. It doesn't take him any time at all to get there."

"Damn!" I said, tears welling up in my eyes.

Cindy looked at me with concern. "What's wrong, Susan?"

"Cindy, you know about my probation. You were in court when the Judge gave it to me. I'm running out of time. If he's not in court today, that just leaves tomorrow's session for me to win a case and get my old life back. What if there's nothing for me to take to trial tomorrow?"

That was it. I did break down and cry. I knew it was those damned female hormones coursing through my body which brought on the tears, but that only made it worse. I was becoming a prisoner of this body—a prisoner for life if something didn't happen in a hurry.

Cindy put her arm around me. "It's okay, Susan. If you have to stay a

girl, it won't be that bad. I'll help you in any way I can."

"Not that bad!" I repeated, practically screaming. "That's okay for you. You've always been a girl and..."

"Always been a girl?" Cindy laughed. "Until a few weeks ago, I was as male as you were."

"But that can't be," I protested. "You act so... so..."

"Feminine?"

I nodded, wiping the tears from my eyes. "How is it that you seem so natural as a woman?"

"Well," she sighed, "I don't really know. I never wanted to be a woman, but I seem to have an aptitude for it. It feels natural. I guess the Judge knew where I would fit in best here."

Was that to be my fate? Would I slowly become more and more comfortable as a woman until I just gave up and accepted my new gender? I shuddered at the thought. I didn't want to be a woman. I didn't want to wear skirts and pantyhose and makeup. I didn't want to have periods or have someone stick his hard dick in me. I didn't want to have babies and wear heels. There was nothing about being female that had any appeal for me. I had been a woman for nearly forty-eight hours, and that was nearly forty-eight hours too long.

"Look," she suggested, "why don't you just show up in court tomorrow morning. I'm sure at least one of the cases will be something you can at least take a stab at. I'll let you know tonight if anyone is awaiting trial in the morning."

I nodded, trying to smile bravely. "You really are a good friend, Cindy. If I'm stuck here, I just hope we can... you know."

She smiled at me. "Sure. We'll be friends. But let's do what we can to get you out of here, if that's what you want."

I got back to the office in time to handle my ten o'clock appointment. It was an insignificant matter. A local roofing contractor wanted me to help him file a lien on a house where the homeowner had disputed the

total payment. I convinced him to participate in an arbitration meeting first. We tentatively scheduled it for the following Tuesday. I was beginning to think I'd be at that meeting since I would be stuck as Susan.

I looked at my watch. I still had over two hours before I met with Steven. That would give me the time I needed to interview Judy and Audrey. I hoped they weren't both in class.

I got their room assignments from the Registrar's office. Both girls lived in Rhea Hall, the one of only two women's dormitories on the campus. In character with other buildings on the campus, it appeared to be perhaps fifty years old and built in a Neo-Gothic style. Both girls lived on the same floor, but at opposite ends. I decided to go right for the gold and try to break Judy first.

"Why should I talk to you?" she asked after I had introduced myself. She was certainly attractive, the sort of girl many guys, even college instructors, would be happy to make a play for. She had long blonde hair, large breasts, and a nearly perfect face and figure. She was as Steven had said a shade, but certainly a very attractive one.

"I'm just trying to find out what happened," I told her, mustering as much innocence in my voice as I could manage.

"Then read my statement," she replied, not fooled by my act. "I don't have anything else to say to you." With that, she closed the door in my face. I couldn't help but feel she was hiding something. I was even more convinced that Steven was being railroaded.

Her friend Audrey was a little better. She was an attractive brunette, but nowhere near as attractive as Judy. She invited me into her room and said, "I don't know what I can do to help you. I mean, Judy is my friend and I didn't see or hear anything."

"I realize that," I said, "but she has made a very serious charge against Mr. Jager. Have you considered what might happen to him?"

"Well," she answered, "it isn't a trial. I mean, he can't go to jail."

"That's right," I agreed, "but he could lose his job. That job is the most

important thing in the world to him. Do you want to be responsible for his dismissal?"

I could see that she had never thought out the consequences of the accusation. No matter that she was a shade; she was a person, or at least ably playing the part of one. It was time for me to press my point home.

"Now, do you want to tell me what really happened?"

She was silent, as if weighing the consequences of her response. If she told me that Judy was telling the truth, she would be responsible for destroying a man. If she told me Judy had lied (which I was sure was the case), she would destroy a friendship. Was she mature enough to make the right choice?

"What... what will happen to Judy?" she asked. The unstated part of the question was 'if I tell the truth.'

I put my arm around her as Cindy had done with me. It was a staged gesture for me at first, but when I held her for a minute, I began to see why women did it. There was a comforting feeling to it. I think I was actually as comforted by the gesture as I wanted Audrey to be.

"I told you, I wasn't there," she said, crying softly, "but I know she's really had a thing for him for some time. She... she told me the morning it happened that that would be the day she got him to make a move on her or else. That's all I know, except for what she said he did to her."

I thought I knew what the 'or else' was. I didn't have an iron tight case, but I had enough to cast serious doubts on her accusation, if I could get Audrey to tell the truth. Cindy would have two days to work on her, so I had to reinforce what she had said.

"If you tell that to the committee, I think you'll be doing the right thing," I told her softly, hugging her. "It's the right thing for Mr. Jager, and it's the right thing for Judy, too. Someday, she would regret doing this, but it would be too late. She needs help, and now, I'll see that she gets it."

Audrey looked up at me and smiled through the tears. I smiled back,

surprised to find that my eyes were a little misty, too.

"I can't promise you anything," she sniffed, "but I'll think about it."

A couple of hours later, Steven was in my office. He was a little depressed because although he was still on the payroll, he had been temporarily taken away from his teaching assignments. The College had told everyone only that he was on a special project, but he and I both suspected that everyone on campus knew the real reason. I told him what I had found out from Audrey, and that perked him up somewhat.

"Now," I told him, "we need to start working on the members of the committee. Do you know who will be on it besides Betty Vest?"

"Yes, I do," he told me. "I got the Board secretary to give me the names of the members of the Moral Review Committee. In addition to the President, there's Eric Vulman, the President of Vulman Industries, and the Judge."

My ears perked up. "The Judge is on the committee. I mean, the Judge?"

"There's only one."

The wheels were turning inside my head. I thought back to what the Judge had said when detailing the terms of my probation. He had said I must argue and win a case before him. He hadn't specifically said it had to be a trial, had he? No, he hadn't. I was sure of it. I had taken Steven Jager's case, and I was prepared to argue it Saturday before the Moral Review Committee, of which the Judge was a member. I had him! I could still get my old life back!

"You seem happy to hear that," Steven commented. "Being in front of the Judge isn't exactly my idea of a good time."

"Oh, I think things will go just fine," I said enigmatically.

Steven looked at his watch. "I have to get back. Even though I'm not teaching, they expect me to be in the office for regular hours."

"But I need to go over some details with you," I said. "I need to know

everything you can tell me about the members of the committee.”

Steven thought for a moment, then replied, “Why don’t you come over to my place for dinner and we can discuss it then?”

Alarm bells suddenly started going off inside my head. Was he putting the moves on me? Did he figure dinner, a few drinks, and then get little old Susan into the sack? I wasn’t that kind of a girl. Hell, I didn’t even really consider myself a girl at all. This was just a body I was forced to wear until my normal one was ready. Maybe I had given Steven too much credit.

“Unless you think it would be inappropriate,” Steven was quick to add.

What was I afraid of? I could handle myself. I didn’t think he would get carried away with his own lawyer three days before the big event. Besides, I told myself, it would be all business. “No, that’s fine. I’ll be there.”

He smiled. “Great. Shall we say six thirty?”

“Sure.”

He started to leave, then turned and pulled a small book out of his pocket. “I know you’ve been very busy,” he said, “but I found a book you might find interesting.”

He put it on my desk. It was called *Mythology* by an Edith Hamilton. I was curious as to why he thought the book would be of any interest. Still, I told him I would look at it when I got a moment.

I was in high spirits for the rest of the afternoon. For the first time since I had initially checked the Judge’s court calendar, I was beginning to feel as if I had a real chance to get back my old life. With any luck at all, the Mouthpiece to the Stars would be leaving Ovid in his GS400 in a few more days. The first thing I would do when I got back to my old life would be... would be... It was odd, but I really couldn’t think of what the first thing would be. Back in the days when I was married to Brenda, I would tell her everything, the triumphs and the tragedies. I guess the first thing I wanted to do was tell someone about Ovid. Oh, they wouldn’t believe me, but I had to tell someone—someone I liked

and trusted. Someone who was a true friend, practically a soul mate.

It was at that moment that I realized there hadn't been anyone like that since Brenda. Well, I would just have to find someone like her, or maybe I would try to reach her. Maybe we could get back together again. I could change; my few days in Ovid had proven that. The loss of my first case had taken the sharp edge away from my life. I no longer had a perfect record to protect. I could live a normal life with a less frenetic practice, and maybe Brenda would be willing to be a part of that life again.

No, I realized sadly, that couldn't happen. I had been as bad for Brenda as she had been good for me. It was my thoughtlessness and inattention which had driven her to seek solace in a bottle. If she were to come back to me, we would both fall into the same old patterns we had been in before, and I would destroy her life again. It wasn't fair to her.

The afternoon passed quickly with only one appointment dealing with a simple real estate transaction. I told Dori to close up and I took the rest of the afternoon off. I wanted to get changed before going to Steven's for dinner. Back in my apartment, I stripped out of my heels, pantyhose and dress and slipped on a woolly robe. It felt absolutely heavenly. I wouldn't miss the heels when I got back to my old life, I thought, although I was actually getting pretty good at walking in them.

Rather than a shower, the thought of a warm bath appealed to me. I ran the water and slipped into the tub. Showers are quick and utilitarian, but baths could be absolutely sensual, I suddenly realized. It was really the first time I had looked at my new body without trying to wash it, dress it, or figure out just how to live with it. The breasts weren't terribly large, for which I was thankful, but they were well formed with substantial pink nipples which seemed to actually harden as the warm water slipped around them. My waist and hips were nice, too, and the legs were a masterpiece. I noted, though, that I would have to shave them, as some stubble was beginning to grow. All in all, it was a very nice body as bodies went. If I had not found a way to beat the Judge, it wouldn't have been a bad body to spend my life in.

Growing bored with this self-examination, I picked up the book I had left by the side of the tub. I had about half an hour to read and relax before getting ready to meet Steven. It was the mythology book he had loaned me. I thought I would read a few pages and give it back to him at dinner.

I had never cared for mythology as a child. I was always firmly rooted in serious nonfiction, and myths did not fit my definition of that. Sure, I had heard or read many of the basic Greek myths, but I found this book much more literate than the children's tales usually associated with the topic.

Relaxing, almost to the point of sleeping, I scanned the book. The, near the end of the introduction, I found a familiar name: Ovid. Apparently, he was a Roman poet who, although he didn't believe the myths for a minute, had written a very literate work on the subject. I could see how Steven, as an English instructor, would be fascinated by his works, but I decided not to add them to my reading list.

It was the next chapter that really caught my attention. I was reading about Zeus, or Jupiter as the Romans knew him. There was a quote by Zeus from the *Iliad* (another work I suspected I would never get around to reading) which intrigued me. It began with 'I am the mightiest of all. Make trial that you may know.'

Odd, but that phrase seemed familiar to me. Where had I heard it before? With a start, it came to me. It was when the Judge had issued my probation. He had said, "Make trial that you may know."

Apparently, he had read the *Iliad* or... Now wait a minute! I thought. That's impossible. He can't be... It's just not possible.

But with a shudder, I began to realize it was possible. I was living proof of that. Who but a being with godlike powers could have changed me into a woman? Who else could have created a place like Ovid?

I read on. It was all becoming clearer to me now. I continued to read and came to an unsettling conclusion. I was not going to be up against one god, but three gods. Betty Vest was probably Vesta. I didn't really

understand why Vesta would be a college president. It seemed more a task for Minerva, but I didn't know enough of the details of the myths to understand why. There didn't seem to be many tales written about Vesta, but she was apparently Jupiter's sister. In any case, she seemed to be a family-oriented goddess. Would she espouse 'family values?' I suspected she would. That meant she would expect high moral standards.

Eric Vulman was most likely Vulcan. Like Vesta, little had been written about him, but he was apparently the blacksmith of the gods. That would fit him in the role of Ovid's leading industrialist. From everything I read, he seemed to be a kindly god. He was also apparently Jupiter's son.

The Judge, his sister and his son—that made the Judge the key to it all. If I could convince him that Steven was innocent, the other two should follow along. It was doable. I could almost feel my penis and testicles growing back already.

I put the book down and picked up a razor from a basket of bath items by the side of the tub. I wasn't looking forward to shaving, but I had to conform to social convention. I sort of let myself go and managed to shave my armpits and legs without drawing blood. That job complete, I got out of the tub. I needed to get ready to go to Steven's. What to wear? I thought about just a blouse and jeans, but I was a little concerned that the Judge would construe such attire as unfeminine and deny my return to manhood. I decided on a casual but feminine look. This was just to meet the terms of my probation, I told myself. Looking good for Steven never crossed my mind, did it?

In a short time, I was dressed in a black turtleneck, red plaid skirt, black hose and black patent flats. A gold necklace with a gold bracelet and two fair-sized gold hoops on my ears and I looked darned good. Applying makeup was becoming almost second nature, although I suspected I was getting some help from Ovid's magic. The only problem was my hair. It was still long and straight like many girls wore it in college. I thought as a professional, I should have a little more sophisticated hairstyle. I resolved to do something about it by

Saturday.

Steven's house was a small bungalow just a block off campus and only about four blocks from my apartment. In spite of the proximity, I drove. I was now an attractive woman, so it wouldn't do for me to be walking too late. Also, it was November, and gray skies had moved in that afternoon, threatening perhaps the first snow of the approaching winter season.

Steven greeted me at the door. He was wearing a forest green turtleneck and khaki slacks. I couldn't suppress the fact that he looked quite handsome. His glasses actually accentuated his eyes, and I hoped mine did the same. He smiled at me. "Hey, you look great!"

"You're not so bad yourself," I managed, actually meaning it. Was I actually becoming attracted to him? I had to get back in my old body quickly before my whole sexual orientation was affected. These new hormones coursing through my body were changing my entire perspective.

"Would you like something to drink?"

Oops. Here it came. Start to get her drunk and then take advantage of her. "Do you have any Diet Coke?"

"Lots of it."

I smiled. "I'll take one, please."

If Steven was disappointed, he didn't show it. I got out two glasses and filled them with ice and Diet Coke. It gave me a moment to look around his apartment. It was uncharacteristically neat for a college instructor's home, I thought. Most bachelors were talented amateurs when it came to keeping a sloppy home. I had been something of a slob myself in my single days. Brenda had hired a maid who stayed with me after she left or my half-million dollar home would have been carpeted in dirty laundry. But college instructors were true professionals when it came to keeping messy houses. Steven was the exception to the rule. The furniture was not new, but it was clean with all the nicks and scratches polished away. The carpet was recently

vacuumed, and all the fixtures had been recently polished.

Even the kitchen was fairly neat, I noticed as he handed me my Diet Coke. There were obvious signs of meal preparation, but even the utensils had been neatly rinsed and placed near the sink for washing. He would make some woman a wonderful husband, I thought. Damn! I had to stop thinking that way.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I just remembered, I didn't get any wine for dinner."

"That's okay," I told him, actually a little relieved. "I don't drink."

"Really?" he said brightly. "Neither do I. I guess we're both cheap dates."

I used to drink, I mused, but when Brenda started having her drinking problems, I gave it up to try to help her. I had never been much of a drinker in the first place. Of course, I couldn't tell any of this to Steven.

"Did you want to go over anything before dinner? We've got about fifteen minutes."

"Let's wait until after," I suggested. Business after dinner would prevent a nice dinner from leading to anything more intimate. Steven didn't seem like the lecherous sort, but I was taking absolutely no chances when it came to the terms of my probation.

I helped him in the kitchen, and as promised, in fifteen minutes we were sitting down to a simple salad and what looked like a very tasty lasagne. The meal was, in fact, great. I had to watch how much I ate since my body was no longer the size it had once been, but I still managed to eat a full helping and all of my salad.

"I didn't make any dessert," Steven apologized.

"I'm glad," I told him. "This was delicious, but it's more than I'm used to eating."

"I'm pleased that you liked it. Did you want to get down to business now?"

"Let me help you clean up."

He shook his head. "No, there's not that much. I'll get it later."

As I said to myself before, he would make a wonderful husband. I mean, for somebody else—not for me. I was going to be husband material myself if everything went right.

"Okay," I agreed. I pulled his book out of my purse and handed it to him.

"You read it already?"

"Not all of it," I admitted. "I just read the first part of the book. But do you really think that the Judge is... is..."

I was trying to say, "Do you really think the Judge is Jupiter?" but it wouldn't come out. It was that sort of feeling that happens when you try to think of a word and you just can't think of it. I looked at Steven as if waiting for him to say it for me.

"What's wrong, Susan?"

"I wanted to tell you something," I replied, "but for some reason I can't." Wasn't that what Johnny Lavelle had said? You can't say it because it's part of the spell.

Steven seemed to understand. "I know. You can't say it directly, but if you're a little obtuse, you can usually get the idea across, so yes I do."

"Then that means that Betty Vest and Eric Vulman...?"

"Are, too."

I breathed a heavy sigh. It was just nice to know I wasn't stark raving mad. Others believed it as well. So I was up against the gods, but I wasn't some virile young warrior in a tunic and sandals, my sword and shield challenging the very gods. Instead, I was a fairly attractive young woman in a skirt and pantyhose armed only with my law degree. Well, it would have to be enough.

"Okay. That doesn't change anything, though. We still have to convince them that Judy is lying. What can you tell me about her that we haven't already discussed?"

“Nothing really,” he replied. “She’s just another student as far as I know. We’ve never discussed anything outside of class. You know she’s a shade, but like all the other shades, she seems to have a completely independent personality.”

He said roughly the same thing about Audrey. It seemed I probably knew more about them than he did at this point. Then, we discussed the committee. Again, he knew very little about any of them, except for Betty Vest.

“She’s very family-oriented,” he explained. “That’s why she seems so upset about this incident. If I’m guilty, I’m flaunting her values. She’ll have to be certain Judy’s lying or she’ll be against me.”

“What about Eric Vulman?”

He shook his head. “I’ve seen him around town. Except for the College and the city, he’s the biggest local employer. He walks with a limp, but I’ve never actually met him.”

“And the Judge?”

He smiled. “I think you know him a lot better than I do. Other than my day in court, I’ve tried to avoid him. Most of the real people in Ovid do, too.”

That was a pretty common attitude in any town, I realized. Judges and police officers represent authority figures most of us would prefer to avoid. Unfortunately, I needed to know everything I could about them. I made a mental note to talk to Cindy the next day.

“Well, I guess that about does it,” I concluded. “I should probably go home and get some sleep.”

“You sure you wouldn’t like a cup of coffee?”

I found that a part of me did want to stay and get to know Steven better, but I couldn’t afford a personal entanglement. I shook my head. “Maybe some other time.”

“How about this,” he proposed. “If we win this case Saturday, I’ll buy you a big steak at Winston’s that night. Consider a bonus on your fee.”

“All right,” I laughed. “It’s a deal.” Why not? If we won, I would be in a mood to celebrate Saturday evening.

I got out without even an attempt on Steven’s part to kiss me good night. I found I was both relieved and a little disappointed. I would have begged off, of course, but... Don’t go there, girl, I thought.

I was still thinking about Steven when I got home. I don’t think I had ever known a man quite like him. He was thoughtful, gentle, intelligent, and, to be completely honest with myself, he was attractive. If something went wrong on Saturday, what would my relationship be with him? There might not even be an opportunity for a relationship, I realized. The Judge might decide to call him into court for his transgressions, and I had little doubt that the punishment would involve a name change to Stephanie.

I had to make sure that didn’t happen. Steven was completely innocent; I was certain of that. As I drifted off to sleep, my last thoughts were that I would see Steven acquitted or know the reason why.

It was suddenly Thursday morning, and I got out of bed with a renewed spirit. I had only one appointment in the office that morning. Then, I would go over to the municipal building and beard the Judge in his own den. I was actually looking forward to it.

Even Dori commented on my mood. I just laughed as she handed me a cup of coffee and told her things had been looking up. She gave me a motherly smile and went back to her desk. I was actually going to miss Dori. I made a vow to try to find someone like her for my office in Dallas. Then, I realized that would be a problem. The office in Dallas was too high pressure for someone like Dori. Her type belonged in a place like Ovid where legal matters were simpler and people operated more on common sense. The more I thought about it, the more appealing it sounded. Maybe when I got back to Dallas, I’d cut back a little bit.

Of course, I suddenly realized, there was another reason a person like Dori wouldn’t fit in my Dallas operation. She and I had developed

something almost like what I suspected was a mother-daughter bond over the last few days. I doubt if she would have been able to do that with Bradley Monroe. It wasn't that Bradley was such a bad person, it was just that he... Now what was I doing speaking of myself in the third person?

"Susan!" Dori called out.

"What is it, Dori?"

"Cindy just called. Court is running a little fast today. She says the Judge will probably adjourn in the next thirty minutes."

Holy cow! I thought. It was almost ten. I had an appointment at ten thirty and I needed to see the Judge. "Dori, can you see if you can reschedule my appointment for after lunch? I really need to see the Judge this morning."

"No problem, dear," she said as I rushed out the door.

As I rushed down the hall to the courtroom, two elderly ladies came out from a trial. They smiled pleasantly at me and continued planning for a bridge party that afternoon. Both ladies were real people. I wondered who they had been. I was still looking back at them as I opened the courtroom door.

"Purse snatchers," Cindy said to me.

I turned to look at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"You were wondering about those two older women," she told me, smiling. "They were purse snatchers. They beat up a little old lady in Tulsa a couple of days ago and took her purse. The police were after them when they fled in the direction of Ovid. Unfortunately, they don't remember who they were, but the punishment certainly fit the crime, don't you think?"

"I have to admit, it does," I replied. "They didn't rape the woman, did they?"

"If they had, they wouldn't have gotten off so lightly," Cindy said grimly. Then, smiling again, she continued, "I told the Judge you were

on your way over. He's waiting for you in chambers."

"Great!" I exclaimed. Cindy really was becoming a good friend. On the spur of the moment, I asked her, "Look, after I've talked to him, do you have time for lunch?"

She looked at her watch. "It's a little early, but sure, I'd love it."

The Judge was reviewing some papers as I entered. He looked up and said with a smile, "Yes, and what can I do for you today, Ms. Henderson?"

He thought he had won. Court was over for the week, and I hadn't won a case. I hoped I had a big surprise for him.

"I've been thinking about what you said during my probation hearing the other day, Your Honor," I began brightly.

"Yes?" he said cautiously.

"You said I had a week to argue and win a case before you, but you didn't say it had to be a trial."

"I believe I did use the word trial," he countered.

"Yes, but not in the same context, as we both know." His use of trial had been the quote from the *Iliad*.

"What other case could you be arguing?" he demanded.

I folded my hands before me in what I hoped was a very demure pose. "Well, Your Honor, I'll be representing Steven Jager at the Moral Review Committee on Saturday."

The Judge grunted, "He's charged with a very serious offense. I don't think you have much of an opportunity with him."

"Oh, has his guilt already been determined?" I asked innocently.

"Of course not!" he said, his voice rising defensively. Then his eyes narrowed. He looked me straight in the eye and asked, "Young lady, are you trying to annoy me?"

"Of course not, Your Honor," I replied. "It's just that this will probably be my last chance to meet the terms of the probation. I believe I have

met all of the other terms.”

“Let’s see about that,” he mumbled, suddenly closing his eyes and freezing in place. When his eyes opened a few seconds later, he said, “Yes, you appear to have met the other terms for the moment.”

I wasn’t surprised to learn that he had the ability to see what I had been up to. I suspected nothing in Ovid was outside his view.

“Very well, Ms. Henderson,” he said at last. “I think you have earned the right to meet the final requirement of your probation. We will consider the Jager affair to be a case for the purposes of your probation. But I must warn you, your chances of winning will not be good.”

“But the hearing will be fair?” I asked.

“Very fair.”

I smiled and prepared to leave. “Thank you, Your Honor.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” he warned.

Cindy and I were walking together chatting like the old friends we were supposed to be. She had suggested we go to the Greenhouse, the place Dori ordered salads from. We had walked over to the restaurant, and on a cold blustery day where the threat of snow was still in the air, I realized I at last had the answer to the question of how women can wear pantyhose in the winter without getting their legs cold. The answer is: they can’t. My legs felt as if they were encased in ice cubes, and the wind swirling under my skirt threatened to make more intimate parts of my body cold as well.

The restaurant was a pleasant little place. We were early, so there was no crowd to worry about. Still, Cindy requested a booth near the back where we could talk without being overheard.

“So what did the Judge say?” she asked the moment we had been seated.

I told her of my conversation with the Judge, then added, “Do you think he’ll really be fair?”

“He always keeps his word,” Cindy told me, “no matter what.”

“You make that sound like a problem,” I observed.

She waited for a minute as the waitress supplied us with water and menus. When she was gone, Cindy said, “It’s not a problem; it’s just that he seems a little inflexible sometimes. He had a strong sense of right and wrong. I think he used to be a lot more arbitrary—how shall I say this—when he was younger. It’s almost as if he’s making up for that now. So once he’s promised something, he never goes back on it, even if what he’s promised doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“But you think he’ll change me back if I win?”

“It’s a big if,” she noted, “but yes, he’ll change you back if you win.”

We each ordered a small chef’s salad with dressing on the side and iced tea. Then, Cindy said, “Look, Susan, I’ve noticed a pattern to the Judge’s sentences.”

“So have I,” I said dryly. “He gets his jollies out of changing men into women.”

“Sometimes,” she conceded. “But there’s a method to what he does. It seems to go beyond justice. Take me, for example. I thought he was giving me a punishment when he changed me, but it really wasn’t a punishment at all. I can’t imagine being anyone but Cindy Patton anymore.”

“That’s fine for you, but what about the person he turned into a dog, or the guy who became a tree? And I don’t imagine those two little old ladies were so tired of being young men that they decided to look like their grandmothers.”

“None of those people deserved any mercy. I did because I really hadn’t done anything wrong. I was just a young guy who was going to die if I didn’t become Cindy, so the Judge did all right by me.”

I saw where she was going with all of this. “Look, Cindy, let’s cut to the chase. You’re trying to tell me the Judge did me a favor by turning me into Susan, am I right?”

She looked down for a moment. "Well... yes."

I shook my head, feeling my long hair move against the back of my neck. "I don't see it that way. Cindy, I was a very successful lawyer, but I know I wasn't a very nice person. I was egotistical, I drove my wife to drink, and I helped a lot of bastards stay out of jail where they probably belonged. I won't say I haven't learned a few things since coming to Ovid. I hope I'm a different person—a better person. But I wasn't cut out to be a girl."

"Haven't you enjoyed it just a little bit?"

I was silent. I really wasn't sure how to answer the question.

She put her hand on mine. "Look, Susan, I'm just saying give it a chance. You may lose Saturday, and I'm afraid if you do, you'll be devastated. At the risk of sounding like a pop psychologist, get in touch with your feminine side. If you do go back to your old life, you'll never have an experience like this again."

She was right about that. "I'll try," I promised.

"Good. And, Susan, if you do lose, I can help." She wrote a phone number and address on a slip of paper and handed it to me. "This is my home number and address. Call me or come by if you need to talk after the hearing."

We said our goodbyes and I walked back to my car. As I was getting in, I suddenly realized that if everything went right, I wouldn't see Cindy again. I would actually miss her since she had become a good friend in a very short period of time. I felt almost as if we really had been old school chums. It was funny how things in Ovid had a tendency to grow on you. For all its bizarreness, it was actually comfortable, like an old pair of shoes.

I took care of my rescheduled appointment. It was an easy one, so it only took about thirty minutes. I spent another hour working on paperwork, since I didn't want to leave any of my clients to the skills of the shade Susan who would probably replace me, assuming they replaced me at all. I wondered, if they didn't replace me, what would

happen to Dori? Would they find another role for her, or would she be changed into someone else? I didn't know if that was even done, but I knew Ovid would be a poorer place without her. If I got changed back, I would ask the Judge to take care of her.

By four, I was finished for the day. I didn't really want to go back to my apartment, and there was nothing to keep me at the office. I wanted to go to the library and do some research on Vesta and Vulcan, but I didn't want to do it until Friday morning when I was fresh. I didn't really know that many people in town. Cindy had a family anyway, and I noted Dori wore a wedding ring. That just left Steven, and he and I had just had dinner together the night before. With a sigh, I resigned myself to a lonely evening at my apartment. Maybe I would use the time to get my personal life in order. I realized with a start that I hadn't even checked the mail at home all week. I had better do that. If I got to be my old self again, I should at least leave Susan's personal life in order, and if I failed on Saturday, it would be my life, so I shouldn't ignore it.

There was actually very little in the mail. There was a letter from my mother. Apparently, she and my father now lived in Tulsa where dad was with an oil company. I wondered if they were really in Tulsa. Were there shades there acting out the roles of my parents, or did the letter just come out of some supernatural post office? I would probably never know, no matter what happened to me after Saturday. The rest of the mail consisted of bills and junk. There was one magazine tucked in between the junk mail. It was Cosmo. I can't say that I had ever read it, but it actually looked interesting to me for some reason. I decided to make myself a tuna sandwich and read it. Maybe I'd watch a movie later.

It was then that the phone rang. It was Steven. "Hey," he said lightly, "are we all ready for the big day?"

"I think so," I replied. "I do have a little more research to do on the committee, but that should wrap it up. Then all I have to do is cast doubt on Judy's story."

"Do you think you can do it?"

"I think so," I told him. "I don't think Audrey will give much support. It may come down to your word against hers, but I think I can make you look good."

"I've got every confidence in you," Steven said, giving me an oddly warm feeling. "Say, look, would you like to go out for a bite to eat?"

"No, I'm sorry. I've already eaten," I lied. Why didn't I go eat with him? I wondered. I did like Steven. I felt very comfortable around him. Maybe that was the problem. I was beginning to feel too comfortable around him. This boy-girl stuff was new for me while I was on the girl side.

"Oh." I could hear the disappointment in his voice. I suddenly realized Steven was as lonely as I was. My heart went out to him. Maybe that's why I suddenly asked, "Say, why don't you come over for dinner tomorrow night? We can go over any last minute items then."

"I'd like that." His voice was suddenly brighter.

"Great. How about six thirty?"

"I'll be there."

Now why had I done that? I would be preparing my arguments the night before the hearing. Fixing dinner for Steven would be a complication, but I wanted to do it. We were two lost souls, it seemed. I hoped that if I succeeded Saturday, the Judge would provide another Susan for Steven. I sensed there was more to Steven's interest in me than a client to his lawyer. Did I reciprocate? Well, of course I did, but we were just friends, weren't we?

I put on a sweatshirt and jeans. God, did it feel good to get out of the pantyhose. I made my sandwich and opened a Diet Coke. After snarfing it down quickly, I curled up on the couch with the copy of Cosmo.

The Cosmo was actually kind of fun to read. I actually giggled at the title of the article I first turned to. It was called 'Ten Ways to Please Your Man in Bed.' I read it anyway, and realized the article was right on. There was nothing in the article that as a man I wouldn't have

liked. I didn't know how anxious I would be to do some of them as a woman, though. I was actually beginning to feel a little warm reading the article, and there was a strange tingle around my nipples. I looked inside my bra and was shocked to realize the nipples were actually slightly erect. There was a moist warmth in my crotch, too.

I closed the Cosmo quickly and threw it on the coffee table. I pulled myself up into a tight ball, willing the feelings to go away. Put the magazine down, lady, I thought to myself, and slowly move away. Nobody will get hurt.

As the feelings subsided, I watched a little TV and actually got to bed by nine o'clock. I was bored to tears, so there was nothing to do but go to bed. I think I was asleep before I could even muster one more coherent thought.

Friday morning was my fourth morning to awaken as a woman, and I had actually gotten the routine down pretty well. I had noticed if I just let myself go into sort of an alpha state, everything came naturally to me. I could select matching outfits and accessories, apply the right makeup, and arrange my hair, all with confidence.

It was in a lawyerly gray suit and two-inch gray heels that I strode confidently into my office that morning, greeting Dori with a cheery smile. I only had one appointment that morning. Then, I would go over to the College library and do some research in the mythology section. I suspected they would have a good one in Ovid.

The appointment didn't take too long, but it was an interesting one. One of the waitresses at a little bar called Randy Andy's wanted to sue the owner, a Marty Bachman, for sexual harassment. It sounded as if she might have a good case. She was real, and I found myself wondering if she was a former man who had lost her memory and now had to learn how the other half lived.

As she left, I found myself wondering if that was why I was now a woman, I didn't feel as if I had ever harassed a woman, but what else would explain what had been done to me? I was still an attorney. My profession had remained the same but my sex had changed. Why? I'd

probably never know, and with any luck, it wouldn't be an issue in a couple of days.

I told Dori where I was going and headed over to the College library to do my research. Before I did, I checked in on Audrey. She was nervous about testifying, but so far, Judy didn't suspect she might be helping our case. Things were looking good.

I had been correct. The mythology section in the library was a good one. It took me very little time to find the information on the various gods. What I had not realized before, though, was that the myths on the gods were not exactly consistent. I was sure Betty Vest was Vesta, but there was very little written about her. She seemed to be goddess of the hearth. Nothing was said about her role in education. That seemed to be the province of Minerva as I had thought, but I wasn't aware of any Minerva associated with the College. Eric Vulman was consistent with his suspected mythological persona of Vulcan. The smith of the gods had become the industrialist of the gods. Here again, though, little was actually written about him. He seemed to have a gimp leg and was apparently well liked, but sources seemed to disagree about many other details, including who his wife was. Some sources indicated it was Venus while others leaned toward Aglaia who was apparently one of the Graces, whatever they were.

As for the Judge, or rather Jupiter, entire volumes were written on him. Some of it backed up the image I had formed of the Judge, but some of it seemed as if Jupiter was wilful, petty and capricious. Perhaps he had changed over the centuries, or perhaps he was the victim of hearsay. I decided to rely on my gut instincts in dealing with him.

So my research came to less than I had hoped. There were no terrific insights on the gods to be gleaned from the books I scanned. I knew a few things about them I hadn't known before, but not enough to weigh in at the Saturday hearing.

Just as I was getting ready to leave, I remembered the Judge telling me to read a Shakespearean play. Which one was it? Oh, yes, *The Merchant of Venice*. I got a copy to read later and checked it out.

I got back to the office just before lunch. Dori had ordered a salad for each of us, so we sat in my office and talked as we ate. I got the feeling I was dealing with a real person. She talked about her husband who was apparently a honcho at Vulman Industries. I wondered to myself if he was a shade, too? Dori had a girl in high school. The way she talked about her, she was a handful. Dori said she was dating some guy on the football team whom she didn't like. It all sounded so normal. I actually enjoyed the conversation. I couldn't imagine talking with my secretary in Dallas in that way. Maybe Dori wouldn't have talked to Brad Monroe that way, but as Susan, I was just one of the girls. The way I was participating in the conversation, I felt myself being more and more feminine.

After Dori took away the empty Styrofoam plates and went back to her desk, I sat there thinking about something Cindy had said. She had told me to get in touch with my feminine side. I wasn't sure I really had one, but it might be interesting to try. I was at loose ends for the rest of the afternoon. Besides, wouldn't it be fun to get a new hairstyle and a sexy dress for my Saturday dinner with Steven? It should be my next to last night as a woman, so it would be interesting to see what it felt like to be an attractive young woman out on a date with a good looking guy. I mean, I would have to restrain myself. Any hanky-panky might be enough to screw up my return to my old life. Besides, I wasn't too sure how I felt about even kissing a guy, especially Steven. So okay, it was time to quit just getting my toes wet and dive into the pool.

"Dori?" I called. "Who does your hair?"

"What do you think?" Janice held the mirror so I could see what she had done to my hair. Janice ran M'lady, supposedly the best beauty shop in Ovid, and Dori told me Janice was the best stylist in the shop. She had agreed to take me on short notice. I think it was just because she and Dori were good friends.

My hair looked great. With it trimmed up and slightly curled, I looked less like a college radical and more like a poor man's Cindy Crawford. "I like it!" I said to my own surprise. I had had some real misgivings about this little fling when I entered the shop, but the results were

impressive.

“While you’re here, how about letting us do your nails?”

“Well...”

“Oh come one. It’ll make you feel like a new woman. I can tell Bobby Sue over there is just dying to work on you.”

I already felt like a new woman and had for the last four days, but what the heck. In for a penny, in for a pound, as they say.

Bobby Sue, like Janice, was a shade. She looked like the stereotype movie manicurist, blonde with heavy makeup to compliment her inch long nails. I was expecting her to be chewing gum and talking in a high-pitched voice. Instead, her voice was a pleasant alto with no indication that she was chewing anything.

“While you’re here, I’d like to work on your makeup a little if you don’t mind,” she said pleasantly as she expertly used a file on my somewhat short nails.

“What’s wrong with my makeup?” I asked. I was rather proud of the progress I had made over the last few days applying it.

She shrugged. “Nothing, really, but I’m a licensed cosmetologist, and I think with these new nails, you might want a little makeup treatment. If you like it, I sell a full line. What do you say?”

“Why not?”

She took about an hour with me, doing both my nails and my face. Several times I wondered what I had been thinking when I told her to go ahead. I had no desire to walk out of here with a painted lady look. When she was finished at last, she held a mirror up to my face and said, “Well, what do you think?”

I was stunned. With my glasses off, hair styled, and makeup professionally applied, I looked almost good enough to be a model. She had given me a very professional look, with the makeup actually more understated than I had been doing. The difference was the colors and how it was applied.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

‘Like’ wasn’t exactly the word I was looking for. For the second time in a week, I felt like a different person. Since Monday, I had been a lawyer first and a woman second. This creature in the mirror was a woman first and foremost. I felt somehow smaller and more vulnerable. I began to think I had made a mistake doing this. I was really just satisfying my curiosity, but how far would that go? What if I decided to satisfy my curiosity about going to bed with a man?

Was I curious about that? Yes, to be honest, I was very curious, but I wasn’t curious enough to ruin my last chance of returning to my old body.

“Yes, I do like it,” I finally managed to answer.

“Oh, that’s great!” Bobby Sue said with a big smile. “You were so quiet there for a minute, I thought you didn’t like it.”

I paid Janice and Bobby Sue, giving them both a healthy tip, and I even bought some cosmetics from Bobby Sue. I figured if I remained as Susan, I could use them, and if I didn’t, I wouldn’t even have to pay the credit card bill. I couldn’t lose. I hoped I could afford it if something went wrong on Saturday. I had no idea how well my law practice was going, but I hadn’t exactly been overworked during my stay.

My next stop was March’s Department Store. The entire three-story store could have fit into a small corner of any major Neiman Marcus store in Dallas, but in spite of its shortcomings, it did seem to have an excellent women’s department. I found the right dress for Saturday night. It was dark green with a very short skirt and cut to show a lot of cleavage. I managed to pick out a pair of shoes and a purse to go with it. My last big fling as a woman was going to be a fashionable one.

“Wow! What happened to you?” Dori asked as I breezed back into the office.

“Janice does nice work,” I said with a grin. I pulled the dress I had just bought out of its sack. “This is for tomorrow night,” I told her.

“What’s happening tomorrow night?” she asked.

“Steven is taking me to Winston’s, hopefully to celebrate.”

Dori gave me a sly look. “You and Mr. Jager seem to be developing quite a relationship.”

“Relationship?” I repeated. “No, Dori, we’re just friends. Besides, he’s a client.”

“You can’t fool me,” she said smiling. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you when he comes into the office. I think he’s nuts about you. And you look like you might be just a little bit interested in him.”

“Oh, no, Dori. This is all just your imagination,” I protested, but something told me she might be right. Steven had been looking at me differently the last day or so. Had I been looking at him the same way? I didn’t think so. I just considered Steven a friend. He was a gentleman and a good looking guy. Maybe my hormones were sneaking up on me again.

I would have to watch myself. If everything went according to plan, I would see Steven three more times. The first would be tonight for dinner at my place. There should be no problems there. We had to finish preparing for the hearing. Then, there would be the hearing itself. Even if I were mad about him, nothing could happen there. The most dangerous time would be Saturday at dinner. Part of me was sorry I had agreed to do it. If we won, we would each be celebrating a different victory. Steven would be celebrating the salvation of his reputation and his career, and I would be celebrating an imminent return to manhood.

I finished up the last of my paperwork about four. I had planned to get out of the office a little early to get changed and fix dinner, so I was right on schedule.

“No problem,” Dori said when I told her I was leaving. “I’ll see you first thing Monday.”

Oops, I thought. No, she wouldn’t. I would be in court. “Dori, I have an early meeting with the Judge, so I may be a little late.” Like forever, I realized.

“No problem,” she said. “Your first appointment isn’t until ten on Monday. I’ll see you when you get here.”

“Yeah,” I said, hefting my briefcase and heading for the door. “I’ll see you then.” I had to fight a terrible urge to go back and hug her. She had become more than a secretary; she had become a friend. I would miss her. She would be the standard by which I would rate all other secretaries in the future, and I was sure none would ever match up. I was a lucky attorney to have had her for the week.

As I drove home, I began to reflect on the life I would soon (hopefully) be giving up. It really wasn’t a bad life. I had made three very good friends. Dori was a marvel. I hoped she got her problems with her daughter resolved. Then there was Cindy. She, like me, had been a man, and yet she had accepted her new role with apparent relish. I didn’t think I could be as accepting of the sex change as she had been. I only hoped I didn’t have the opportunity to find out.

Then there was Steven. There was something about him I just couldn’t put out of my mind. He was masculine, yet at the same time vulnerable. He was a dedicated teacher, an intellectual if you will. I could easily see how some of his female students could have become infatuated with him. I recalled the scene in an Indiana Jones film where one of the girls in his class wrote ‘I love you’ on her eyelids, to Harrison Ford’s alarm. I could see a girl doing that for Steven.

Yet I couldn’t see Steven and Brad Monroe being friends. Brad was too driven, too ensnared in the need to win all the time, no matter what the consequences. He would chew Steven up and spit him out. He would... Why was I thinking about Brad as if he was another person again? I was Brad, and I liked Steven. In fact, if I got stuck in Ovid for the rest of my life, I might even learn to... to...

No! I couldn’t think about that. It wasn’t right. It wasn’t... natural? I just couldn’t think about that. Not now. There was still too much to do. I had to stay clearheaded for the hearing. There was a good reason why American Bar Association ethics demanded the attorney-client relationship be a professional one. No attorney could be depended upon to do her best when romantically entangled with the client. Her?

Oh, God.

I started dinner as soon as I got home. I had planned something simple, just baked chicken with yogurt, lime and salsa. It was easy to make. With some asparagus on the side and a salad, it made a tasty, attractive and fairly healthy meal. In my recent bachelor days, I had actually become a decent cook when I had to be. I had to do something to balance out the unhealthy meals eaten out in restaurants.

I slipped out of my suit and opted for pants. I found a pair of black pants, low-cut boots, and a rust-colored sweater, all of which I thought would not be too sexy. I was wrong, though. The boots were almost elfin in appearance, the pants were formfitting, showing off my legs and ass, and the sweater was tight enough that it did nothing to disguise my breasts. Oh well, it was too late to change. Besides, I thought I looked pretty good.

Steven arrived at exactly six thirty. He was dressed in a brown tweed jacket, tan slacks, and a beige turtleneck. I guessed that he must have nothing but tweed jackets and turtlenecks in his wardrobe. He was the archetypal college instructor.

He looked at me appreciatively. "I like your hair that way. It really looks fantastic."

"Why, thank you," I said with a big smile.

"Nice place," he commented, looking around.

"Thanks," I replied, suddenly realizing that I hadn't vacuumed or dusted. Thank god I wasn't the kind of person who left junk scattered everywhere. Even at that, Steven was a better housekeeper.

"Dinner's almost ready," I told him. "Can you make the drinks? Diet Coke is in the cupboard over the dishwasher."

"Sure." He pulled two cans out of the pack, then noticed the library book I had laid on the counter. He picked it up and said, "Shakespeare's play, eh? Going after my job?"

"Hardly," I laughed. "Someone suggested I read one of his plays, *The*

Merchant of Venice. Is it any good?"

"It's not one of his best," he told me. "But of course, I prefer his tragedies to his comedies. It's hard to get the humor to translate to our era. To a lot of people, that play is anti-Semitic."

"Do you think it is?"

He shook his head. "Not really. It's just that Shylock, one of the main characters, is Jewish, and he's more or less the villain of the play."

It didn't sound like anything that would have an effect on my situation. I wondered why the Judge had suggested I read it. "Does it have anything to do with the law or justice?"

"Sure," he said opening the book. "Here it is. It starts with 'The quality of mercy is not strained'."

"I've heard that somewhere before," I interjected.

"It's a famous passage. See, here it is."

I looked at where he was pointing and was drawn at once to a line which read, 'And earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice.'

I looked up at Steven. "I'm not sure what it means."

Steven shrugged, "Like anything else in Shakespeare, it's subject to a myriad of interpretations. I guess the simplest interpretation would be that justice alone isn't always the answer. If all you seek is justice, many men can provide that, but to temper justice with mercy takes a god-like insight."

I wasn't sure what the Judge was getting at, but I had a suspicion. It was as if he were telling me that what he had done to me wasn't just in the name of some twisted justice that as a mere mortal, I would find hard to understand. He was telling me that he was also being merciful in his role as not just a judge, but as a god. I had yet to understand how giving me breasts and a vagina was an example of mercy.

Steven and I had a pleasant dinner. We talked about Shakespeare some more. I had never taken the time to read the Bard, but Steven

piqued my interest. I made a mental note to attend a couple of his plays and get a better feel for him. My total immersion in law through the years had kept me from enjoying the arts. I vowed to change that when I got back to my old life.

Steven finished dinner with a satisfied sigh. "That was terrific. You've got to give me the recipe."

"It's pretty simple," I told him. "Just bake the chicken, add a little yogurt and lime juice, and top with salsa. I suppose you could make your own salsa, but mine comes right out of the jar."

"In any case, it was great." He looked at me with an appreciation that made me a little uncomfortable.

"Well, we need to get down to business," I announced. I wanted to keep the evening completely professional. "I think we're all ready for tomorrow. I just want to go over a couple of points."

"Fine."

"Ms. Walker is going to claim that you were alone with her in your office. You've admitted as much."

"But the door was open," he pointed out.

"Yes, but no one saw that," I countered.

His shoulders slumped. "So it's my word against hers."

"Not necessarily," I told him. "I have a strategy I think will work. I just want to make sure you have all the details straight in your mind. Remember, the committee will have the College's attorney in that meeting as well to make sure everything is kosher. If he spots any inconsistencies in your testimony, it won't go well. Now, let's go over all the details."

We spent the next two hours practicing. I drilled him with every question I could think of. Most of the questions would never be asked in the hearing, but he had to be ready for everything. I had done this many times before, so I was in my element. For Steven, though, it was a new and gruelling experience.

It was ten o'clock when I finally said, "Okay, I think we're ready."

"Thank god," Steven said, stretching as he stood. "I think I may sleep in the hearing tomorrow."

"I doubt that," I replied, "but you'll sure want to after this is all over."

He smiled at that. "I can't. I have to take a beautiful woman to dinner tomorrow night."

I felt myself blushing. I really didn't know what else to do in response, so I returned his smile with a faint one of my own. I didn't want to tell him that his dinner date with me might well be the last public appearance of Susan Henderson. After all, that was what I really wanted, wasn't it? But I would miss Steven.

"Just get a good night's sleep tonight," I advised him. "You need to be sharp tomorrow."

"Okay," he agreed. "I'll pick you up an hour before the hearing."

"You don't have to do that. I can just meet you there."

"Nope, my mind is made up."

I finally agreed and hustled him out the door before anything could happen between us. I was becoming increasingly aware that Steven was very attracted to me. That wasn't really what concerned me. I was aware that I was reasonably attractive. What concerned me was that I was beginning to feel an attraction as well. I hadn't planned on it. In fact, I had done everything I could to prevent it, but there were different hormones flowing through my body, and my new plumbing was becoming aroused. If I didn't win tomorrow, I suspected it would not be long before I could no longer fight back these growing feelings. It would be my last chance.

Saturday morning seemed to come the minute after I had put my head on the pillow. I groaned as I got out of bed. This was it. *La Momenta de Verdad*, as the bullfighters say: the Moment of Truth. The hearing was at ten, so most likely, by one o'clock, I would have either saved Steven's career and my own identity, or I would be Susan Henderson for the rest of my life, and poor Steven would be disgraced and

possibly subject to further punishment in court. I had to be at my best.

The occasion called for my most serious look. I chose a navy blue suit with a skirt that came down almost to my knees. The blouse was simple and white—the white of purity and truth. The jewelry was simple and understated, as was the makeup. The shoes had only a small heel to show I was all business. I examined myself in the mirror as I slipped on my glasses. Ally McBeal, eat your heart out.

As promised, Steven was at my door promptly at nine. When I opened the door, I saw he was carrying a large paper sack. “Coffee and bagels,” he explained. “It might be a long time until lunch. Sorry it’s not Starbucks, but we don’t have any of those in Ovid yet.”

“This will do fine,” I laughed, in spite of the serious mood I was trying to maintain. “I’ll get some orange juice and cream cheese and we’ll feast.”

We were in a confident mood as we arrived at the hearing room. There was nothing special about the room. It was just a seminar room in one of the classroom buildings. We appeared to be the only people in the building. It was fifteen minutes until ten, and no one had arrived from the committee. That gave me the opportunity to arrange the seating the way I wanted it. I had Steven sit next to me half way down the table. That way, the committee would be forced to sit opposite us, but not so far away as they would if we were seated at one end. It gave more the appearance of a conference rather than of a trial. It also forced them to look Steven and me directly in the eye. As I said, I was in my element. I was the predator, not the prey.

The committee members entered the room at five before ten. The fact that they entered as a group meant that they had already had a meeting to decide how to proceed. The Judge, I already knew, so I looked in his direction first. On cue, he offered his hand with a formal, “Ms. Henderson.”

I took it, replying equally formally, “Good morning, Your Honor.”

“I would like to introduce you to our Chairman, Eric Vulman,” he said, turning to the tall beefy man at his side. Eric Vulman looked out of

place in his suit. He would have been more at home in a work shirt with tongs and a hammer in his hands as he worked a sword or horseshoe into its proper shape. He was, as the texts had speculated, not a handsome man, but he had the appearance of an honest, hardworking businessman perhaps fifty years old. It was hard to imagine that he was a god.

He stepped forward, limping slightly as he offered his hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Ms. Henderson. The Judge has told me a lot about you."

I was sure he had. I just smiled rather than comment and took his hand. His handshake was firm but not uncomfortable, and it nearly swallowed my much smaller one.

"And this," the Judge continued, "is Elizabeth Vest, the President of Capta College."

"Call me Betty," she said with a sincere smile as she extended her hand. "Only the Judge ever calls me Elizabeth."

Betty Vest didn't look like a college president. She looked more like Betty Crocker. She had a pleasant, even attractive face and a matronly figure. She appeared to be no more than forty with just a touch of gray surrounded by fairly short brown hair. I was pleased to note that I had dressed well for the occasion, for she was wearing an outfit that appeared to be almost the twin of my own. There was a friendly twinkle in her eyes that made you feel that she was genuinely glad to meet you.

I took her hand. As I did, she placed her other hand over mine. "Please call me Susan," was all I managed to say.

"And this," the Judge said, motioning to an older man, perhaps sixty, "is Henry Wilcox, the attorney for the College."

Henry Wilcox looked like the typical distinguished attorney. He had gray hair which was beginning to recede, a small moustache, a trim body, and wore the male equivalent of my own outfit. He was also a shade. I wondered if I was the only human attorney in Ovid. I took his

hand as well, but neither of us spoke, as if the first to speak would somehow give away too much information to the other. We did look each other directly in the eye, though, and it was my impression that he was not confident with the actions which might have to be taken in the meeting.

When we were seated as I had planned, Eric Vulman, who was seated directly across from me, called the hearing to order. "We are here to examine a very serious charge levied by two Capta students. Ah, here they are now."

Judy Walker and Audrey Bertram had slipped quietly into the room and seated themselves at one end of the table. Good, that was just where I wanted them.

Eric placed an unusually small pair of glasses over his nose and began, "The charges are that Steven Jager did on Monday last make overtures of a sexual nature to Judith Walker, a student in his Freshman English class. This is not a formal court of law, but rather a deliberative body tasked with determining Mr. Jager's fitness to continue in the employment of this institution."

These were formal words. Good. That meant the hearing was going to follow a formal pattern. Proof would be required. I was most certainly in my element now. My greatest fear was that the meeting would be informal where hearsay and speculation often run rampant.

"If it acceptable to the Committee," I began, "I would like to suggest that before this hearing continues, that any witnesses be asked to leave the room until their testimony is officially required."

"And why is that, Ms. Henderson?" the Chairman asked. I could hear the other members of the Committee shuffling uncomfortably in their seats. This was not the way they had planned things.

"I would reserve my reasons until there are no witnesses in the room," I replied.

The members of the Committee looked at each other, then at the attorney. He gave a small but perceptible nod.

“Very well, Ms. Henderson,” the Chairman agreed. “We will ask the witnesses to leave until we have had a chance to discuss your reasoning.”

The two girls with questioning looks stepped out of the room, ushered by the attorney. When they were gone and the attorney had returned, I began, “The accusations made by the two witnesses can neither be substantiated nor disproven since there were no witnesses to the actual exchange. However, the accusation has been backed up by Ms. Bertram who, although she did not by her own admission see any misconduct, has been a confidant of Ms. Walker and has stated that Mr. Jager had shown sexual interest. We intend to show that Ms. Walker’s story is nothing more than a fantasy which cannot be substantiated in any way.”

The Judge and the attorney conferred for a moment. Then, the attorney whispered something to Betty and Eric. When they had finished, Eric said, “Very well. We will conduct this hearing in the fashion you have suggested so as to be completely fair to your client.”

The Committee began the hearing by asking Steven to tell his side of the story. All I had to do was sit back and take notes. The questions they asked were much more gentle than the ones I had asked him the previous evening, so he was well coached. He appeared confident but thoughtful, as if he was sure he had done nothing wrong, but was willing to cooperate in every way to make certain that nothing he had done was improper. Eric Vulman and Betty Vest asked all of the questions. The Judge remained uncharacteristically silent, simply observing and taking occasional notes. I hope I looked calmer than I felt. There were a couple of lines of questioning I had hoped the Committee would not pursue. To my relief, they did not. When the Committee had finished asking its questions, the chairman turned to the attorney and said, “Bring in Ms. Walker.”

Judy Walker had done an excellent job of preparing herself for her appearance. She had worn very light makeup and had her hair pinned back to give herself a very vulnerable girlish look. Her cream cable knit sweater and tan ankle length skirt gave her a very chaste, demure

look. She appeared as she wanted to appear, as an innocent victim.

“Ms. Walker,” the Chairman began once she was seated, “you have levelled a very serious charge against Mr. Jager. We would like to hear in your own words what happened last Monday.”

“Well,” she began in a very soft voice, looking down at her lap, “I stayed after class Monday to ask Mr. Jager a question about Milton. That’s what we’re studying now. He asked me to come back to his office with him. I did. I never suspected he would do what he did.”

“And what was that?” the Chairman asked.

Judy looked very serious. “He exposed himself to me and told me to... to suck on it. I... I didn’t know what to do. He was blocking the door. I managed to push my way past him and ran out into the hall. I ran back to my dorm and told Audrey. She said I should tell Ms. Vest about it. I didn’t want to get him in trouble, though. Then Audrey talked me into it, so I went in the next morning and told her what had happened.” She looked around like a frightened deer in the forest. “I... I guess that’s all.”

Either Steven had lied to me or this girl deserved an Oscar. My money was on the latter. This was not the same girl who had refused to talk to me a few days earlier. That girl was strong and forceful. This girl was nothing like that. This was an innocent little flower, about to be plucked by the evil beast.

I waited for a nod from the Chairman, then began, “Ms. Walker, you say Mr. Jager asked you to come to his office. Why was that?”

She shrugged. “To answer my question, I guess.”

“Did he always take you to his office to answer questions?”

“I... no. I mean, sometimes he did.”

I scowled at her. “Which is it—no or sometimes?”

She thought for a minute. “Sometimes.”

“Isn’t it true that this was the first time he asked you to come to his office?”

“Well, yes, I guess it was.”

“Do you know why he asked you to come to his office?”

“I do now,” she said ominously.

Oh, good. Steven couldn’t remember if he had told her why he wanted her to go back to his office or not, and I had coached him to say nothing about it. The Committee had failed to ask him that as well.

“Then you didn’t know that he was meeting a colleague for lunch right after class, a colleague who was going to meet him at his office?”

“Uh, no.”

“How often did you stay after class to ask questions?” I asked, changing the line of questioning to throw her off balance.

“I don’t know.” She was beginning to fidget now. “Maybe once a week.”

“And the questions were always answered in the classroom?”

“Yes.” A defiant ‘yes’ at that.

“Then don’t you think it is a little odd that the one day he takes you back to expose himself to you is the one day he’s expecting someone in his office at any moment?”

There was no response for a moment. Then she said angrily, “I don’t know. I just know he pulled out his c... his penis and told me to suck on it.”

She just shot her demure little girl act in the ass. I smiled and said, “Thank you, Ms. Walker. I’d like to see Ms. Bertram now.”

Judy Walker was escorted out. She had an angry scowl on her face. Things hadn’t gone as she had planned. Now, she had to alert Audrey to be careful. I wasn’t going to give her that opportunity.

“Please send her in at once,” I requested. Henry Wilcox smiled knowingly. This wasn’t his fight. He was only there to see that the College wasn’t embarrassed. He was now my ally. Shade or not, I suspected he was an astute attorney, and he realized momentum was

now on my side. At the moment, it appeared to him that doing what I had asked was the best course of action. He brought Audrey Bertram back immediately.

Audrey looked worse for wear. I had given her reasons to doubt the little plot Judy had hatched with her. Judy had been hammering her for the last few days, I was certain. Now, she had seen Judy shaken, so she had no way of knowing what had been said. Thank god this wasn't an actual trial, or I could never have gotten away with what I was doing.

"Ms. Bertram," I began, not giving the Committee a chance to question her. I had become a *de facto* member of the Committee and no one was challenging me. I was asking the questions for them. "Ms. Bertram, we have just heard testimony from Ms. Walker regarding alleged sexual misconduct on the part of Mr. Jager. Would you please tell us what you know about the incident?"

This was the moment of truth for certain. If she substantiated Judy's story, I had a long day ahead of me no matter what. I had to hope that she was sufficiently shaken to try to weasel out of any culpability. I wasn't disappointed.

"Well," she began meekly, "I really wasn't there."

"You weren't there," I repeated, "but you talked to her about the incident."

"Yes."

"And she told you that Mr. Jager had asked her back to his office because he was expecting a luncheon appointment?"

"Ye- no. What luncheon appointment?"

"Then you weren't aware that someone was about to visit Mr. Jager's office, someone he had been expecting?"

"No," she said softly.

"Someone who would have caught them in the middle of the act Ms. Walker claims she was asked to perform?"

It didn't take much. Audrey was practically at the breaking point when she came in the room. "She said I wouldn't have to do this!" she said with a loud sob.

"Do what?" I demanded.

"Do this—testify. She said all I would have to do was tell Dr. Vest and that would be it," she cried, practically incoherent. "It was all her idea. She said she would take care of all of it. I just wanted to help her. She's my best friend, and now... and now..." That was all she could say. She broke down in tears.

No one else in the room spoke. I had been through confrontations like this many times before, and I knew we had won.

The members of the Committee looked at each other. They each nodded, and the Chairman spoke. "Mr. Jager, the Committee appears to owe you an apology. Please accept that apology, and rest assured that the persons responsible for the accusation will not escape lightly."

Steven looked at the members of the Committee with obvious relief. "Thank you," he said sincerely. "I'm just happy the truth prevailed, but I really don't want to see Judy or Audrey here punished. I think they just need help. They're both good girls at heart, and as someone recently quoted to me, mercy should always season justice."

"A noble thought," the Judge commented with a sidelong glance at me. I couldn't tell, but I think he was actually smiling.

Outside the classroom, Steven suddenly surprised me with a loving hug.

"Be careful," I warned him lightly, "or you may have another sexual harassment suit on your hands."

He let go and looked a little concerned until he saw my smile. "Do you want to go to lunch?"

"Thanks, Steven, but no. I have some personal business to take care of this afternoon. Besides, you're taking me out for a big dinner tonight as I recall. If I eat now, I won't be hungry tonight. In fact, to work up an appetite, I think I'll walk home. It's only a couple of blocks."

He grinned. "Come to think of it, if I ate now, I wouldn't be hungry either. I'll pick you up at six?"

"Six would be great," I replied.

The Committee filed out, led by Henry Wilcox. Each pleasantly said good-bye to me and walked on, except for the Judge who remained behind. "You did a marvellous job in there," he said, "but what would you have done if you hadn't uncovered his lunch appointment?"

I smiled. "There was no lunch appointment."

"What?"

"There was no lunch appointment. Steven never said there was. I just wanted to do something to shake our Ms. Walker up a little. Phony stories like hers always fall apart when you tweak them."

"You could never have gotten away with a stunt like that in my court," the Judge said seriously.

"You're right," I agreed, "but as you pointed out, this wasn't a courtroom."

He actually laughed. "Very good, Ms. Henderson. Or I suppose I should call you Mr. Monroe since that is who you will be on Monday."

My heart jumped. "You're going to change me back?"

"Nothing could stop me now," he replied. "I always stand by my agreements. Be in court at nine on Monday. By ten, you'll be on your way home. You won't even remember Ovid even existed!"

"Thank you," I managed to say as he turned away. I had done it! I was going to be Brad Monroe again. I had won.

Then why did I feel so empty?

The walk home was pleasant. The cold air had moved on, and it was a pleasant late Fall day in Ovid, sunny and about fifty. I walked slowly back to my apartment, taking in the cool crisp air and enjoying life. I had been Susan Henderson for only five days, but it had actually started to feel normal. I would actually miss some things about being a

woman. There was a light feeling to being so much smaller than I was as a man. It made walking home, even in heels, seem almost like walking on air. I would actually miss some of the sensations I felt walking home, the feel of long hair swirled by the breeze, the airy but not unpleasant feeling beneath my skirt, even the rhythmic sway of my breasts and hips as I walked. Yes, I would actually miss those sensations.

The apartment seemed empty when I walked in, as if I wasn't really there anymore. I wondered if it would have a new resident on Monday, or if someone else would be Susan Henderson. Maybe another lawyer would come speeding through over the weekend and become the new Susan Henderson. Part of me hoped that wouldn't happen.

I puttered around the apartment, cleaning up, doing laundry. I knew I didn't have to, but I had to do something. My work was almost done here. I didn't want to just sit and count the hours with... what? Anticipation? No, not really that. I couldn't quite put my finger on the emotions I was feeling. To take my mind off such thoughts, I picked up the Cosmo again. I don't even remember what I read; I just looked at the words until it was time to get ready for dinner.

I suppose it was because I expected my dinner date with Steven to be my last night in a skirt and heels that I decided to go all out. Although I hadn't wanted to stay a woman, it was a unique experience. This would be my one and only opportunity to go out on a formal date as a woman, and I wanted to make it a memorable evening.

I started by taking a leisurely bath. That was a decadent habit I planned to continue when I got my old body back. Of course, I would probably have to give up the scented bubble bath, but at least I would enjoy the feel of warm waters caressing my body rather than the harsh sting of a shower. I shaved my legs and under my arms. I had to admit, it was a more sensual experience than shaving one's face.

Dressing took no time at all. I had been dressing in skirts and heels for nearly a week now, so it was becoming second nature to me. I wondered if starting Monday, I would have trouble tying a tie again. The thought of doing that made my neck hurt. I dressed in the laciest

black lingerie I could find in my dresser. I had also found a dark shade of hose—not pantyhose—that would go well with my new dress and shoes, so for the first and probably only time, I slipped on a garter belt. The Dress fit like a proverbial glove. Although my breasts were at best average in size, the dress pushed them in and up to form ample cleavage. The hemline was wickedly short, showing off my legs encased in the smoky nylons. The shoes were only three-inch heels. I had worn a pair that high earlier in the week, but this heel was much narrower and caused my steps to be a little shorter.

Makeup and hair had become easier as well. I can't say they had become second nature, but with careful attention, I did a more than passable job. I added just a little extra eye shadow on a whim and was pleased with the results. I slipped my glasses into my purse. I might not be able to see that well without them tonight, but I would look great. I spritzed on a little scent, and I was nearly finished.

Jewelry was the final step. I had minimized my wearing of jewelry during the week. As a man, I normally wore only a watch, so I had little interest in or knowledge about jewelry. As Susan, though, it was different. I actually liked the finished look jewelry gave to this body. I found two gold bracelets, a beautiful gold necklace and matching earrings which were accented by tiny diamonds. I suspected they were a gift from my shadowy parents since I doubted if Susan made enough to afford them. They looked great when I put them on. I was just finished attaching the last earring when the doorbell rang.

When I opened the door, I watched in amusement as Steven's jaw dropped. "Wow! You are absolutely fantastic."

I grinned. "Why, thank you, sir." He didn't look so bad himself. The tweedy look was gone. He was wearing a dark blue pinstripe suit, oxford cloth blue shirt, and a tie which looked as if it had cost him a week's salary. I may have been the lawyer, but tonight, he looked more like a lawyer than I did.

"Oh," he remarked, pulling a bouquet of roses from behind his back. "I almost forgot these. But now that I've seen you, the roses don't look so great."

I flushed at the compliment. "I think they're very pretty, and very thoughtful of you, too. I'll put them in water right now."

I took the flowers to the kitchen, wondering quietly what was happening to me. I guessed that having the pressure of the hearing and the need to satisfy the terms of my probation fulfilled, I was actually relaxing in Susan's body. I was able to enjoy the feeling of being an attractive young woman in the company of an attractive young man. It felt more satisfying than... than anything else in recent memory.

Winston's proved to be a modest steakhouse on the edge of town. It was on a small wooded hill and actually enjoyed a view of Ovid spread out in the valley below. Inside was a small town version of a four star restaurant, complete with carpet, drapes, classical music and table linen. It appeared cozy and relaxing. I was momentarily startled as the maitre'd pulled my chair back for me, but I recovered quickly and took my seat with a smile.

"What do you think of the place?" Steven asked when we were both seated.

"It's very nice," I replied. And it was. I liked the simplicity of the restaurant. I had grown tired of the posh Dallas restaurants with their unhealthy food, snooty waiters, and ridiculous prices. Winston's seemed a little more... well, real. That was an odd description, I thought, since nothing in Ovid was real in the normal sense of the word.

"They even have sparkling grape juice," Steven told me as a waiter brought a silver bucket to our table. He grinned, "I called ahead and told them to have it ready."

I sometimes missed the pleasures of a celebratory glass of champagne, so this was a delightful surprise for me. The waiter poured us each a glass of the sparkling juice.

"To you," Steven said raising his glass.

"To me?"

“Yes. Raise your glass.”

I did so, carefully holding it as Steven’s glass clinked against mine.

“To Ovid’s most beautiful attorney,” Steven said with mock solemnity. Then, more seriously, “Without you, I’d have nothing to celebrate tonight.”

Why was I feeling so pleased? I felt a contentment I hadn’t felt since the early days of my marriage with Brenda. I had to put on the brakes, I realized. Something was happening between Steven and me that could go no further. I hadn’t forgotten the last condition of my parole: no sex. I was actually starting to become curious as to what it would be like with Steven.

Fortunately, the waiter interrupted the scene with the pronouncement of the evening specials. His interruption stifled the mood for a little while. We managed to order dinner, and the talk turned to Steven’s career as we ate.

“I would like to make full professor,” Steven told me. “I’ll be up for Associate Professor as soon as I’m tenured. I think I’ll have a good chance of getting it right after tenure.”

“That would be terrific,” I said between mouthfuls of the most exquisitely tender steak I had ever eaten. “Do you already have your doctorate?”

“All I need is my thesis,” he replied. “Capta has an arrangement with the University of Oklahoma in Norman. It isn’t exactly an Ivy League degree, but it’s all I’ll ever need at Capta.”

“So you’re going to stay at Capta?”

He grinned. “I don’t think I have a choice. I don’t think anybody ever leaves Ovid.”

“I suppose not,” I conceded. I hadn’t really thought about that. I wondered if the locals could leave. Maybe after I got back to Dallas, I could call Steven and... No, that wouldn’t work. I’d be a different person, and I certainly didn’t plan to continue any sort of relationship with him. I wasn’t gay. Besides, the Judge said I wouldn’t even

remember Ovid.

I wouldn't remember Ovid. A shudder went down my back. I realized I didn't want to forget Ovid. I wanted to remember my time here.

"Did you hear me?"

"What?" I said, breaking out of my reverie.

"I asked you what you wanted to do with your career here in Ovid?"

I was going to have to tell Steven that I had less than two days left in Ovid, but I didn't know how. For the moment, I replied, "Oh, I guess I'll just continue to practice law."

"I suspect it isn't as interesting a practice as the one you left behind," he ventured.

"Not by half," I agreed.

We talked about many other things. We talked politics (what attorney does not like to talk about politics?), sports, the state of higher education in America, and a myriad of other topics. I hadn't had so much fun just talking to someone in years.

When we had finished dessert and coffee, we looked around and realized we were practically the only people left in the room. Nearly everyone else had left without our even noticing it. It was nearly ten. In Dallas, there would have been a substantial crowd of late diners, eating after attending a play or concert, but Ovid was a Midwestern farm town, and people went to bed early, even on Saturday night.

"Do you want another cup of coffee?"

"I think I'm going to float away if I do," I laughed. "Maybe we should call it a night."

"All right," Steven agreed reluctantly, signalling for our check.

As he drove me home, I began to feel what Cinderella must have felt as the clock began to strike midnight. The ball was over. My womanhood was almost a thing of the past. I found I didn't want the night to end, not yet. "Steven," I ventured, "would you like to come in

for a cup of coffee?”

“I’d love to,” he replied softly.

When I had made the coffee and poured each of us a cup, we sat facing each other at my kitchen table, just as we had at Winston’s. But the mood had changed. I was feeling wistful. It was almost time to say good-bye to Steven forever. Steven was quiet as well. He just sipped his coffee and looked at me, as if trying to decide what to say.

“Susan,” he began at last, “I’ve never told you about my previous life. As you know, our past lives are rather private things here in Ovid, but I’d like you to know mine.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” I told him. “I don’t think I care who you were before. I just like the way you are now.”

“Susan, I’m in love with you,” he blurted out.

“No, Steven, I...”

“No, I’ve got to get this out,” he said, almost in pain. “I know you’ve been here only a short time, and I don’t know who you were before, but we’re all here for the rest of our lives, and I want to spend my life with you.”

He leaned forward, taking another sip of coffee, as if it could somehow give him the strength to continue. “It was just before Christmas last year,” he began. “I had made a first-class mess of my life. I had no career, no family, and a drinking problem that landed me in the Ovid jail for driving while impaired.”

I was starting to feel a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach. I could almost tell what would come next. I seemed to sense it. Woman’s intuition?

“I was a woman then,” Steven continued, and with a shrug added, “I was actually married to a lawyer at one time—a very famous lawyer in fact. You may have heard of him. His name...”

“Brenda?” I asked softly, my heart about to break through my breasts.

“What? How could you...?” His eyes were suddenly as wide as I was

sure mine had become. “Brad?”

I put my head in my hands. Someone once said that man plans and the gods laugh. The gods, or at least one god in particular had to be laughing now. No wonder I had felt such a strong attraction to Steven. I suddenly felt Steven’s larger hand on mine. “Brad... Susan? Are you all right?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “I can’t believe it. It’s just too bizarre.”

“But it’s not!” Steven countered, holding both of my hands in his. “It’s wonderful. Oh, Br–Susan, I never wanted to leave you. I always loved you, but I had to go.”

“I know,” I agreed. “I was destroying you. I didn’t mean to, but I couldn’t stop myself. My career meant everything to me.”

“That’s what makes this such a wonderful opportunity,” Steven said brightly. “We both have the careers we want here in Ovid, and now we can have each other.”

“Steven,” I whispered, pulling my hands away from his, “I can’t.”

“What?”

“I can’t. I’m not ready for this. I’m not Susan—not really.”

“Yes, you are, and I love you.”

I was fighting to hold back tears and failing. I knew if I cried, he would enfold me in his arms, and I knew where that might lead. I was in shock to the point of practically being in pain. I needed to think. I couldn’t let this conversation continue. “Steven, please go now.”

“But, Susan...”

“No! Please go!” I said more forcefully. “I need some time. I need to think.”

There was a worry of concern on his handsome face now. He realized this discussion could go no further. “Susan, I’ll call you in the morning.”

“All right,” I agreed. Anything to get him out. As soon as I heard the door close behind him, I broke out into a flood of tears.

Reluctantly, I got out of my clothes. It was probably the last time I would wear anything like them, I thought sadly. I put on a pair of flannel pajamas. No sense in wearing anything very feminine. I hadn’t found the nerve to tell Steven the truth, but I could tell it to myself. In less than thirty-six hours, I would be male again. I would have completely forgotten Ovid and Susan and even Steven. I had won. Then why did I cry myself to sleep?

I awoke to the sound of a telephone ringing. As always, I was awake instantly. I looked at the clock by my bed as the phone continued to ring insistently. It was nearly ten. I knew who was calling. It had to be Steven, but I didn’t want to talk to him. Not now, at least.

At last, the ringing stopped and the answering machine turned on. “Susan, this is Steven. I need to talk to you. I know this is a difficult time for you... for both of us really. We can work it out, though. I love you, Susan. I... I need you. Please give me a call.”

There were tears forming in my eyes again as I heard the message. What could I tell him? Gee, Steven, I’m very sorry, but tomorrow I’m going to be a man again, so I don’t think it would really work out... I had once sworn that if I ever had the chance to get Brenda back, I would take it, but Steven was Steven, not Brenda. It wasn’t the same, was it? Was it?

Reluctantly, I got out of bed. A hot bath and a cup of coffee were what I needed. Then, I would figure out what to tell Steven. I drew a bath and stripped off my pajamas. Standing there naked in front of the tub, I looked up into the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. It was the first time I had really inspected myself nude in the mirror. It was as if I had been avoiding doing so before. I had tried somehow to deny what had happened to me. Now, though, in the waning hours of my womanhood, I was determined to come to grips with whom I had become.

I didn’t know why I had chosen that moment, or maybe I really did.

With a sigh, I moved a hand to one of my breasts, gently stroking at the nipple. A little shudder passed through my body. I moved my other hand down to my crotch, brushing against the soft mass of pubic hair to the very lips of my vagina. I felt a twitching sensation and gently stroked around the area, feeling warmth begin to grow.

Carefully, I stepped into the tub and slid down into the warm water. An involuntary sigh of pleasure escaped me. I continued to touch myself, my eyes closed, pretending it was a man. Then, with a sigh of disappointment, I stopped. I knew what I had been doing. There was still a way to remain in Ovid with Steven if I chose it. All I had to do was have sex with him before I saw the Judge. Then, I would have failed to satisfy the terms of my probation. But that would require a greater sacrifice from me than I was ready to make. As much as I wanted to stay with the person Brenda had become, I was still not able to think about having sex with her—him.

But did I really want to stay in Ovid? Yes and no. If the Judge would turn me into Brad and Steven into Brenda, I would be willing to stay on the dark side of the moon. But that wouldn't work. Even if the Judge agreed, Brad Monroe would go crazy in Ovid. Brenda would probably be all right, but Brad would demand more legal challenges than Ovid would provide. And I doubted that the Judge would be willing to provide a few local murders to satisfy Brad's drive. No, if I stayed, it would have to be as Susan Henderson. Was I willing to do that? I still wasn't sure.

I got dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. It was really the first time all week I had dressed to go out in such a unisex fashion. I guess I had worried that the Judge would think such attire violated my pledge to act like a woman at all times. It probably wouldn't have, but I had taken no chances. Now, though, here I was, throwing caution to the winds. Yeah, right. With a sigh, I pulled off the sweatshirt and replaced it with a cream-colored sweater.

I did put on a little makeup, though. I didn't want to appear in public as Susan looking unattractive. That was certainly a real change for me. A week ago, I wouldn't have cared.

I made some coffee and ate a bowl of cereal, really not tasting any of it at all. I was too busy trying to decide how to proceed. It was nearly noon and I didn't have much time. I decided my first move would be to see Cindy. She knew the Judge better than anyone else. If anyone knew what the Judge might be willing to do, it was Cindy.

I stepped out into a bright late fall Ovid day. The sun was low on the horizon, but doing the best it could to provide some warmth as it shone through the leafless trees. I had on a leather jacket, and it was sufficient to ward off the chilly air. I got in my Civic and started the engine. That was my one regret. I was really going to miss my Lexus if I stayed in Ovid.

I had no trouble finding Cindy's house. In the first place, Ovid wasn't a very big town, and in the second, it was laid out on a typical Midwestern grid without any high hills or other obstructions, so getting around was a breeze. Cindy's house was a modest two-story in a typically American middle class neighborhood. I almost expected to see the Beaver running out of the door yelling, "Come on, Wally, or we're going to be late!"

The Beav didn't answer the door, though. Instead, a very pretty six-year-old girl did. She was wearing a medium-blue dress with white leggings and little black Mary Janes. She looked up at me with big blue eyes but said nothing.

"Michelle, honey," I heard Cindy's voice from the back of the house, "I'll get the door."

Cindy stepped into the entryway. "Michelle! I've told you before, I'll answer the door."

"I'm sorry, Mommy," the little girl replied, chagrined.

"Okay, honey, go get changed."

Cindy was wearing a dark blue dress with a red and yellow flowered print and heels.

"I didn't catch you on the way out, did I?" I asked, embarrassed now that I hadn't called ahead.

“Oh, no,” Cindy laughed. “We just got back from church and hadn’t had a chance to change yet. Come on in the kitchen. I just started a pot of coffee.”

“I hope you don’t mind me just dropping in like this,” I said, smelling the freshly-brewed coffee. I had already had two cups, but it smelled too good to pass up. Like many people who give up alcohol, I now drank too much coffee. “I just needed to talk to someone.” Before I knew it had happened, I had slumped down into one of the kitchen chairs and was softly crying.

Cindy came up behind me and put her arm around me. “Oh, Susan,” she began, sympathy in her voice, “I guess this means you lost yesterday. I’m so sorry. Being a woman isn’t that bad, though.”

I shook my head and managed to get out between the sobs, “I lost, but not the way you think.”

The coffee calmed me down. I managed to get control of myself in a few minutes. Soon the only sound in the house was the giggles of two children playing. Cindy told me her husband was at the supermarket he managed, so there was no one to disturb us. We looked like two old chums just enjoying a relaxing cup of coffee together. I managed to tell her what had happened, only breaking down once during my narrative.

“So,” she summed up for me, “the net of it is you want to remain here as Susan.”

“Yes,” I sighed, really realizing it completely for the first time. “It’s the only way I can stay with Brenda, or Steven now.”

She shook her head and chuckled, “Here you are, the only person I’ve ever seen beat the Judge at his own game and you want to throw the match. But they say a woman is entitled to change her mind.”

“Do you think he would allow me to stay if I asked him?” I asked. “I mean, I don’t have to accept his offer, do I?”

“You already agreed to the terms,” Cindy answered. “Have you ever read stories about prisoners who become so comfortable in prison that

they never want to leave? The system doesn't allow for that. Once they've met the conditions of their sentence, they're back out on the street. That's why some of them commit crimes again, so they can be put back in jail where they're comfortable."

"So maybe I could get caught speeding again," I ventured, not really believing it.

Cindy shook her head. "It wouldn't work. When you get changed back, you won't even remember you were ever in Ovid."

No, I was sure I wouldn't remember, but I was willing to bet there would be an emptiness in my soul that I could never quite identify. Brenda would be lost to me forever, but I would never know why. I might be the most successful attorney on the face of the Earth, but buried deeply within me would be that sense of loss. How did the old saying in the Bible go? Something about what profits a man to gain the world yet lose his immortal soul? Was that what would happen to me?

Cindy leaned over her coffee and looked straight into my eyes.

"Susan, you know what you need to do to stay here, don't you? I don't think I really have to spell it out for you."

I looked down. "I don't know if I can, Cindy. I mean, I know I have the plumbing for it, but the thought of making love to a man just doesn't seem right."

"Do you want to make love to me?"

I jumped, startled. "No! Of course not! I mean, we're both... And I'm not..."

"Not gay?"

"I'm not, no," I agreed, flustered.

"Then if it seems gay to make love to a woman and it doesn't feel right to make love to a man, that doesn't leave you with too many choices. I don't think the Judge included a nunnery when he created Ovid."

I slumped in my chair and took a long drink of coffee, not even

flinching when it practically burned my tongue.

“So if I want to stay here...”

“You have to violate your parole and you have to reconcile yourself to being a woman one hundred percent of the time. That includes in bed with the person you love.”

“What... what’s it like?” I ventured.

Cindy leaned back with a dreamy expression. “When it’s done right, it can be fantastic. You two have an advantage Jerry and I didn’t have. You both remember who you were, and you’ve both had experience from the other sexual perspective. I envy you. I mean, Jerry is great, but to have a partner who knows exactly what will do the most for you would be unbelievable.”

“Then you think I should do it?”

“That’s your decision, Susan.”

I rose to my feet. “I don’t know, Cindy. I don’t know if I’ll have the courage to go through with it or not, but I’m going to try.”

She got up and gave me a sisterly kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be rooting for you.”

I drove around town for a little while, just trying to adjust to Ovid. Could I spend the rest of my life here and be happy as a small town lawyer and as a woman? If I did nothing and returned to my old life, I would be wealthy, respected, even feared by my opponents. In Ovid, wealth was out of the question. Even once I had built up my practice, the most I could hope for would be modestly comfortable. Fear? In a town run by the gods, it was hard to imagine anyone being very afraid of me. As for respect, yes, I could have respect, but not as much as I would have had if I had been male. Female attorneys were seldom awarded the respect freely given to their male counterparts.

On the other hand, if I returned to my old life, I would come home every evening to an empty house. There was no one for me in the outside world; I was sure of that now that I had rediscovered the one love of my life. Brenda and Brad had been a single being ripped apart

by ambition. Susan and Steven could be different. I was sure of that.

The twisted knot in my stomach disappeared. The dark cloud that threatened to obscure the brightness of the late fall day cleared from my mind. I knew at last what I had to do. I had made up my mind.

Steven must have been beside himself. There had been three more messages on my answering machine when I had returned home, each more desperate than the last. I had answered none of them. What I had to say had to be said in person and said quickly before I lost my nerve.

I was standing at the door of his house. I had gone home to change clothes, so here I was now, wearing what I hoped was a sexy outfit under my trench coat. All that showed of it now was dark nylons and the highest black heels I could find. I hoped Steven came to the door quickly, I thought as I knocked. The November sun was going down and I wasn't wearing the warmest outfit in the world.

The door opened, and Steven looked at me with surprise and joy. "Susan! My God, I'm happy to see you. Come in, let me take your coat."

"I'll keep my coat on for now," I said, entering the house and standing directly in front of him after he had closed the door. "There's something I need to tell you first."

"All right," he said cautiously, obviously not sure where I was going with this.

I had made many summations to juries in my career, but condensing what had happened to me during the last week in Ovid into a few concise sentences was not easy. "Steven, your hearing was part of a test the Judge agreed to with me. If I got you off the hook, I could be returned to my old life. If I didn't, I would be Susan for the rest of my life."

Realization was dawning on his face. His confusion was turning to disappointment. "Then you're free to leave—to go back to being Brad Monroe."

“Yes,” I agreed, “I can go back.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow morning at nine o’clock I’m to appear before the Judge. If I’ve successfully met all the terms of my probation, I’ll be changed back.”

He looked at me suspiciously. “Have you met all of the terms?”

“So far,” I replied coyly. “The only one I haven’t completed is the Judge’s prohibition on sexual relations.”

Before Steven could reply, I opened my coat. After what had happened to him over the last few days, it was hard to imagine him being shocked, but he was. His mouth dropped open as he stared at me. I was wearing nothing but a black lace teddy I had found at home. Susan was meant to be a healthy girl, and one of her drawers had contained several outfits that would have fit the occasion, but I had decided the black teddy was the best. It pushed my flesh in the sexiest of ways, causing my breasts to be larger and fuller. It came to such a small vee at my crotch that I had had to trim my pubic hair just to make it look right. The garter belt was the same one I had worn Saturday night, but now it was in plain sight, my dark stockings clinging seductively to my thighs.

“Susan,” he began, almost unable to speak, “are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” I breathed as I stepped into his arms.

I was snuggling in his arms, watching as the darkness turned into faint morning light. We were still naked. It had been the most incredible night of my life, male or female. I thought as I lay there about the Cosmo article on ten ways to please your man in bed. I think I had used all of them, and maybe added a couple which weren’t in the article. Steven had been very very responsive. I had smiled, realizing for the first time as a woman how easy it was to arouse a man. The trick, though, was making the most of that arousal. We had.

The first time, Steven had entered me gently, waiting until I was so wet that I thought my entire body was turning to liquid. It was a strange feeling, to be entered rather than being the one doing the entering, but it was a satisfying feeling. He had filled me in a way that made me feel complete, as if my body were a puzzle and his penis was the last piece. When he began to thrust carefully but decisively, I thought I was going to explode. There was a wave of emotion and pleasure spreading like tendrils of ivy through my entire body. But instead of the explosive concentrated climax I had enjoyed as a male, my orgasm was more all-encompassing, wrapping my entire being into a blanket of pleasure.

We slept for a while, then began again, slower the second time leading to an even more thrilling conclusion. Then we slept again.

It was completely dark when we began again. By now, we were both relaxed in our new roles. Since I had once been male, I knew what to do to heighten his pleasure. Since he had once been female, he was able to do the same for me. Together we were one being, laughing and enjoying the feel of each other's bodies.

Steven was frustrated the third time. He couldn't quite get it going. I told him it was no problem, and on impulse, shifted until my face was over his crotch. Before he could protest, I had taken him in my mouth, slowly bringing it to life once more. Before he could ejaculate, his face was between my legs, returning the favor. It was a new experience for us both, and while enjoyable, not as satisfying as more conventional sex, but we both agreed we would do it again sometime.

We managed one more, only an hour or so before daylight. We were both tired from interrupted sleep and our strenuous activities, and we were both just a little sore, but we couldn't resist the temptation.

Now, it was nearly dawn. I had to get up, go home, and get dressed for court. Then, if things went well, I would be off for my office to begin my first day of my new life unshackled by the fetters of my old existence. I gently slid out of Steven's arms. He mumbled and suddenly awakened.

“Where are you going?”

“It’s morning,” I told him. “I have to go home and get dressed for court.”

“Here,” he said, getting up himself. “Let me find you something to wear.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

He looked at my naked body. “Oh, yes I do. You can’t wear what you were wearing last night. I think we ripped it to shreds. I have a jogging suit. We can adjust it long enough for me to drive you home. After you get changed, I’ll take you to court.”

I shook my head. “No, Steven, I need to do this myself. I don’t want you there this morning. I don’t even think he’ll allow you in the courtroom.”

“Then I’ll wait outside.”

I went over to him and kissed him gently. “I have to do this alone.”

“I love you,” he said after a moment of silence.

“And I love you,” I replied, meaning it more than anything else I had ever said in my life.

I got to the courtroom a few minutes before nine and slipped into the back row. Another case was underway. The Defendant appeared to be a trucker. He was a large muscular man respectfully holding a cap emblazoned with the word Peterbuilt on the front. He did not look very happy. The Judge was murmuring the unfamiliar words again as the trucker stiffened into a near trance. Then, it was over. Officer Mercer led him, dazed, from the courtroom.

Cindy had slid in beside me. “When he comes out of the trance out at the Midway Truck Stop, he won’t be thinking about molesting any young teenage girls who are hitchhiking anymore,” she whispered.

“Why not?” I whispered back.

“He won’t have anything to molest them with anymore.”

Given the Judge's sense of justice, I was surprised there were any men in Ovid. I also wondered why some people seemed to change while they were in front of the Judge and others, like the trucker and me, changed later. I suspected I might never know.

"Ms. Henderson!" the Judge boomed, causing me to jump. I got to my feet and approached the bench. It actually felt good this morning to be in a skirt and heels. I thought I looked great. I just hoped I had the opportunity to leave the courtroom dressed the same way.

"Yes, Your Honor?" I said formally.

"You are appearing before me today to be returned to your previous life. Let's do it right now and get you on your way."

Oh my God! He was going to do it without checking to see if I had met the terms of the probation. I had to do something at once or I would be Brad Monroe again.

"Uh, Your Honor?"

"Yes, Ms. Henderson? Or should I say Mr. Monroe?"

I was hoping there were no perspiration stains on my suit. This was not going the way I had planned. "Your Honor, as an officer of the court, it is my duty to inform you of a violation of my parole."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Would you care to elaborate?"

I was silent. He was a god. Couldn't he just use his powers to see what I had done? Apparently, he could, for a stern look crossed his face. "Yes, Ms. Henderson. There has been a severe breach of parole. Do you have anything to say in defense of this violation?"

"No, Your Honor," I replied, trying to look as contrite as possible.

"Then I have no choice but to revoke your parole and re-impose sentence. You shall remain Susan Henderson for the rest of your life."

"Yes, Your Honor," I said respectfully. It was all I could do to restrain

myself from rushing up to the Judge and kissing him.

“Next case!” the Judge intoned with a rap of his gavel. I turned to see Officer Mercer bringing in a young punk wearing a motorcycle jacket, his hair shaved into a Mohawk, but I wasn’t thinking about the punk. All I could think about was Steven. I could hardly wait to see him!

“Oh, Ms. Henderson?” the Judge said suddenly.

I turned. “Yes, Your Honor?”

“It has come to my attention that some of the cases before this court are more complex than others. There may be from time to time a need for a Public Defender to ensure the rights of some of the accused. If you’re interested, the court will authorize a standard fee of one-hundred and twenty-five dollars an hour for this work. Are you interested?”

In my old life, my paralegal was billed out at that rate. I was billed at several times that. But that was in my old life. I smiled and replied, “Yes, Your Honor, I’m very interested.”

“Good. Get with Ms. Patton later today. She will have the agreements.”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

The click of my heels was the sound of a victory march to me. I had done it! I was going to be Susan Henderson for the rest of my life. It was hard to imagine that only a few short days ago, I would have considered that fate a disaster. Now, I could only think of how happy I was. There were tears in my eyes as the courtroom door closed behind me, but they were tears of joy. Then, I saw a figure standing by the building exit. Steve! I smiled at him. He smiled back. Hand in hand, we walked together into the beautiful Ovid morning.

It was like waking up from a dream. Then I saw Dina looking at me from across the table. There were tears in her big brown eyes. “Que bonita!” she said to me.

“What?”

“Oh, Cindy, I said how beautiful.” She wiped away the tears. “Truly, they were made for each other.”

“Or remade for each other,” I quipped. Then, looking around, “What happened anyway? I feel like I was in a trance.”

“Oh, that’s how it works,” she laughed. “You and I lived the story through the powers the Judge gave you.”

“You mean I’ve been sitting here staring out into space for... how long?”

Dina shrugged. “Only about ten seconds. Don’t worry, nobody noticed anything. So what happened after that? Don’t worry, you don’t have to go back into a trance. Have you seen Susan since then?”

“I see her almost every day,” I told her. “Since she’s a lawyer, she’s in and out of my office all the time.”

Dina leaned forward, a devilish grin on her face. “Does she suspect anything?”

I giggled, “Not a thing! She has no idea it was all a setup on the part of the Judge. He’s been trying to figure out a way to lure Brad here ever since he changed Brenda into Steven. He finally got close enough to him when he sold him the Lexus. Brad never knew it was the Judge in disguise who sold him his car and suggested he take it on a road trip.”

“The Judge has been a master of disguise for centuries,” Dina added. “It’s good to see he hasn’t lost his touch.”

“We got to him just in time,” I said more seriously. “With all the strain Brad had been under over the last three years, he would have died from a coronary before another week passed. Of course, Susan didn’t know that. If she had chosen to return to her old life, Brad would be dead by now.”

“I’ll bet there was one hell of a ripple in reality when Brad Monroe ceased to exist,” Dina speculated while taking a drink of wine.

I nodded in agreement. “I think it was actually harder for the Judge to

keep Brenda's existence viable until Brad could be coaxed here. Normally, she would have ceased to exist as soon as she was changed into Steven. But you're right. The ripple effect when Brad Monroe winked out of existence was incredible. No less than twelve murderers who had gotten off the hook when Brad defended them were convicted and imprisoned in the new reality. Unfortunately, OJ still got off, but Brad had only consulted on that one, so maybe his impact wasn't that great there."

"So I assume Susan and Steven are still an item?"

"Yes," I replied, "and that reminds me of something." I dug into my purse and produced a white envelope which I gave to Dina.

"What's this?"

"It's a wedding invitation. Susan and Steven are getting married a week from tomorrow. You can even be in the wedding party."

She was grinning from ear to ear. "But she doesn't even know me."

"I know," I agreed, "but then again, she really hasn't met a lot of people in Ovid. She asked me to be her Matron of Honor, and Dori will be one of the Bridesmaids. You'll be the other one."

"I wouldn't miss it," she laughed. "Another drink?"

I shook my head. "No, one is enough for me. I think I'll go see Jerry and see if I can get him out of there a little early."

"Porque, hermana?"

I smiled back at Dina. "Susan's story has given me a couple of new ideas for later tonight."

Dina was still laughing as the door closed behind me.

Ovid III: The Road Crew

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It had grown colder in Ovid through the month of December. The remains of an early December snow were still piled by the side of the streets and a gray sky threatened at least another four inches before evening. I had grown up in Pennsylvania and had laughed at snow and ice from the time I was old enough to drive. But I was male then. Being changed into a woman with two small children tends to change one's perspective about such things as icy roads. I had a lot of errands to run before meeting my husband, Jerry, at Northside Elementary for the twin's Christmas pageant.

As I headed for my car in the municipal employee's parking lot, I looked at my watch. If I could change one thing about being a woman, it would be to make larger watches fashionable. What idiot ever convinced women to wear these petite little watches with a face that you needed a microscope to read? I smiled to myself. Other than that and a couple of other things, like periods, I found I was actually enjoying my new womanhood.

Court had gotten out early, so I was able to finish up some paperwork and take the afternoon off. I needed the time. I still had a lot of Christmas shopping to do, and stores in small towns like Ovid don't stay open late like the malls in bigger cities. Thank god I had a Christmas list from Jerry and the kids. I wouldn't have had the foggiest idea what to get them. Although they knew me as a constant in their lives in my role as wife and mother, I had known them in their present personas for only a little over two months. Even with the list, though, I wouldn't have a lot of time. If I hurried, I might have time for a...

"Lunch?"

I turned at the sound of a musical voice, a voice I would recognize no matter what body she wore. "Dina!" I exclaimed, forgetting that she no longer called herself Dina Luna.

Dina had been an attractive Hispanic woman. She had decided to change herself for Susan's wedding. "Goes better with the dress," she had said. The woman who stood before me was a tall, well-proportioned redhead with pale Irish skin in a lovely emerald green dress. She wasn't dressed warmly enough for the day, but when you're the goddess Diana, I guess warding off the cold isn't a big problem. She was stunning as always. She flashed her emerald eyes (which, of course matched the dress) at me and said in a light brogue, "What do ya' say, lass? A bite 'o lunch perhaps? And remember, it tishn't Dina now, it's Diana O'Moon."

I laughed, "What? No Irish last name for 'Moon'?"

She snorted in disgust, giving up on the brogue as well, "I'm afraid not. The Irish language sounds like someone clearing her throat. The word for moon is something like 'gealach.' I don't even know if I'm pronouncing it right, so let's just stay with O'Moon."

"Fine with me," I smiled. I knew why she had done it. We had both been in Susan Henderson's wedding, and she had chosen green dresses for the bridesmaids. As Dina, Diane had fretted that the dress didn't look that good against her dark skin, although she loved the dress. I had seen the wheels turning the whole week before the wedding. Sure enough, when she showed up at the rehearsal, she had picked a new look that went well with green.

"So how about lunch?"

"Diana, I'd love to, but I have so much Christmas shopping to do," I protested. "I thought I'd just grab a quick sandwich and fight the shopping crowds at March's."

"No need," she said with a teasing grin as she pulled a small sheet of paper out of the air. "Vera is holding a few packages for you at March's right now. This is the list."

"You've done my shopping for me?" I practically squealed. "Let me see the list."

She handed me the list. It was virtually identical to the one I had in my

purse. "But how did you...?"

"What's the good of being a goddess if you can't use a little magic to help your friends? See, now you have time for lunch."

And that's how we ended up at the Greenhouse, waiting for our lunches with a glass of wine each. I normally wouldn't drink at lunch, but since I wasn't going back to work that day, I figured I might as well. I needed to celebrate the unexpected and successful conclusion of my first Christmas shopping as Cindy Patton.

"Okay," I said after we had ordered, "you want something, don't you?"

Diana looked around the room in mock innocence. "Oh, nothing really. I just thought since you had a little time, you could tell me a story."

Telling a story to one of the gods consisted of falling into a trance for a few seconds in which we would virtually relive the exploits of one of Ovid's newest residents. Although to someone who casually looked at me, it would appear that I was in a trance for only a few seconds, entire days and weeks would go by for Diana and I.

"Okay," I relented. After all, she had done all of my shopping for me. It was the least I could do. And besides, it was actually a lot of fun. "Is there something in particular you'd like to hear? We had a college girl from Omaha through the other day who got herself changed into a three-month-old baby boy."

She scrunched up her face. "Ugh! Not my kind of story. Even if they remember their past lives, all they can think about is where's mom for the next meal and how long before I'm potty trained? Besides, I hate the taste of the baby food."

"Well," I ventured, knowing very well the story she wanted to hear, "there was a state road crew through here a few weeks ago."

"Right!" she said brightly. "I heard about that. It was just before Susan's wedding, wasn't it? Well, come on, girl, tell it!"

"Okay," I said relaxing for the coming trance. "It seems there was a pothole just outside of Ovid..."

I had a teacher in high school who used to say to me, “Marty, not very many ditches are dug by hand anymore.” That was his way of trying to motivate us to get a good education. Well, I’m here to tell you he was wrong. A lot of ditches are dug by hand. I know it for a fact, because I’ve dug plenty of them. And when I’m not digging ditches, I’m filling potholes or raking concrete or doing any of a number of tiresome, dirty jobs for the Oklahoma Department of Roads.

My teacher was right about one thing, though. He said I couldn’t avoid digging ditches if I didn’t get a good education. I hate it when he’s right.

It isn’t that I wasn’t smart. Hell, I had an IQ that meant I could have been a rocket scientist if I wanted to, but I didn’t. All I wanted was to have fun, and man, did I ever have fun.

I lost my cherry on my fifteenth birthday. She was a junior—a year ahead of me—but jeez, could she fuck. And she was just the first. By the time I dropped out of school in the middle of my junior year, she was just the first out of about twenty.

I started drinking at the same time. Not too much at one time, but you know, just drinking. It wasn’t hard to get booze. All you had to do was hang around some of the older guys, and they’d buy it for you. I didn’t drink much anymore. It was too hard to get up the next day and go to work with a hangover. Besides, drinking was an expensive habit, and expensive I couldn’t afford.

Okay, so if I was so smart, why did I drop out of high school? Was it because I was more interested in sex? No, not really. Sex was extracurricular. I never had to cut class to have sex. Was it the drinking? No, I didn’t drink any more than a lot of my fellow students. Was it because I was stupid? Well, a case could be made for that. To be completely honest, though, I was bored. Bored, bored, bored, bored, bored. I thought I was too smart to be in school. I was wrong. By the time I wised up, I was nineteen and working too hard to keep myself fed to take the time to go back and finish my education. It’s a shame, too. What’s the old line Marlon Brando has in *On the Waterfront*? “I coulda been a contender; I coulda been somebody.”

My folks didn't really give a rat's ass. They had six kids to raise, and I was just number four. My big brother, Billy, he was into drugs. He was really fucked up, and Mom and Dad knew it. He got a lot of attention. The rest of my brothers and sisters were just like me—unmotivated. One of my brothers and one of my sisters finally graduated from high school, but the other two sisters got knocked up and dropped out. Me? Well, I've gotten a little education on my own at least. As long as I can remember, I've loved to read. I'm probably the only guy digging ditches for the State of Oklahoma Department of Roads who's read most of Shakespeare's plays. I knew I had to be the only one that well read who had been digging them for ten years.

I mean, I wasn't all bad. I didn't smoke. I just never liked cancer sticks. And I didn't do drugs. Oh sure, I had tried pot. Bor-ring. Heavier drugs I stayed away from. I didn't need drugs to be a loser. I could do it just fine without them. The girls had pretty much gone away by now. The ones who used to be interested in me weren't anymore. I was a loser. And the ones that were interested in me were bigger losers than I was, so I wasn't interested in them.

Working on a road crew was about as high as I figured I'd ever go in life. I mean, it had its advantages. The pay wasn't bad, and since the state did a complete background check, I didn't have to compete with illegal aliens for the job. About the only guys who got into this sort of manual labor were the dropouts and the illegals. Everybody else had too much sense.

At least, I thought to myself as I looked out the truck window at the cold December landscape, it wouldn't be too rough today. We had gotten a pretty easy assignment. We were going to fill a couple of big potholes out on a stretch of state highway that didn't get a lot of use. The truck was loaded with cold patch, a tar-like substance that can be applied to a road in winter. It doesn't hold like the hot tar you see in the summer, but it makes the road a little smoother until a permanent patch can be made.

Our supervisor had gotten a call from some judge who said he had to get his Lincoln realigned after he hit one of those potholes. When a

guy like me calls up to complain about a road, nobody gets too excited, but when a judge calls up, a road crew looks like a fire company at a four-alarm fire. We had been dispatched out of our home base in Muskogee, so we were a little out of our normal territory, but as I said, when a judge says jump, we jump. I was surprised there weren't more than four of us on the crew. Actually, two guys could have handled it, but our supervisor jumps when somebody important tells him to.

Brad Blackstone was driving the truck. He and I had been told to go on out to the site and wait for two other workmen who were being diverted from another job. That was fine with me. Brad and I were pretty good friends. We had worked together and played together for over a year. I guess it was because we were two of a kind. Like me, Brad was pretty bright to be working on a road crew. Unlike me, I got the idea he wasn't here because of a lack of motivation. There was something in Brad's past that had driven him from Chicago to Oklahoma, but I didn't know what it was. He never talked about it, or his family or anything else. The only thing I really knew about him was that like me, he had never graduated from high school. It was as if he didn't want anybody to know anything about his past. Whatever happened, it must have been serious, I thought. My job for the day would be sentry. Every road crew needed to have somebody standing out on the road in an ugly yellow safety vest with that pole sign that said Slow on one side and Stop on the other. That was the easiest job on the crew. I had drawn that job because I was on light duty since I had pulled a back muscle a couple of days before. I'd probably take crap from the diggers since sentry was easy.

"Who's digging today?" I asked Brad.

He shrugged as he brought the truck to a stop next to the road. "I don't know," he said. "Just as long as it's not the Asshole Twins."

"Right," I agreed. The Asshole Twins weren't really twins. They weren't even really related, but they were assholes. Mack was the brains of the pair, although he probably had more cunning than intelligence. He was about my height—six feet—but with a spare tire

around the middle. You wouldn't figure a guy could get pudgy doing what we did for a living, but Mack managed. His partner was Bear. Bear was about as tall as Godzilla, and he was the brawn of the outfit. Whatever Mack said, Bear did. I didn't even like to think about everything that might entail. Almost for certain it included selling drugs, but I was sure there were plenty of other unsavory activities for them to be involved in as well. I tried to ignore their sidelines. It probably wasn't safe to get involved.

Brad was busy looking at a map. He would stop every few seconds and look around. "Shit!"

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"We're lost. That's the problem."

I looked at the map. It was a highly detailed, official department map. "How can we be lost?"

"I don't know," Brad said angrily, pounding his fist against the door. "Damn! Now Murray is going to be pissed." Murray was our supervisor.

"Well, where are we supposed to be?" I asked, more than a little concerned. This job might have been shitty, but I needed it. Crews that wandered around lost didn't keep their jobs very long.

"Right here," Brad said, pointing at an intersection between two state highways. "I passed County Road 12 five miles ago. This intersection should have been at least a mile back, but there's no intersection here. And see that town over there?"

I saw the town he was speaking of. It was a small town, maybe ten or twelve thousand, nestled in a little valley below. "Yeah?"

"Well it ain't supposed to be there," he told me with a heavy sigh.

Every truck carried a mobile radio. I picked ours up and said, "Unit thirty-six to base. Come back."

I released the call button to wait for a reply, but all I got was static.

"Here, give me that," Brad demanded, pulling the radio out of my

hand. "Unit thirty-six to base. Come back."

I don't know why he expected it to work for him when it wouldn't work for me, but he was disappointed. He got the same static in reply that I did.

"Ain't that a kick in the ass!" he growled, thrusting the radio back into my hand.

Yeah, it was a kick in the ass. What it meant was that we were lost with a full load of tar and sand, and two diggers were going to be someplace else waiting for us without hearing anything about where we were. The final result of the snafu was that Brad and I would probably have to get back to state Maintenance and let Murray chew on our butts for not being where we were supposed to be. Great.

"Hold on," Brad said, suddenly a little calmer. He was watching a white extended cab pickup truck approaching us from behind. It appeared to be a state vehicle. At least maybe we'd all be lost together. The truck pulled up behind us and two men got out, one tall and one gargantuan.

"Oh shit!" I breathed. "It's the Asshole Twins."

"Shit don't say half of it, brother," Brad muttered.

We hopped down out of the truck to meet our diggers. They looked to be about as pissed as we were. To make matters worse, they both looked like they had had a busy night of parties before they came to work. Bear's face was flushed, and Mack's face was the color of a stop sign.

"So where's the fucking pothole?" Mack yelled, as if it were our fault that it wasn't there.

"Don't know," was Brad's terse reply. Brad had taken a dislike to Mack the minute he met him, almost six months before. He had never found any reason to change his first impression. I think if it wasn't for the ever-present Bear, Brad would have taken Mack out months earlier.

"Well what the fuck are we supposed to do?" Mack asked, exasperated.

“How should I know?” Brad asked, leaning back against the truck.

“Did you radio in?” Mack demanded.

“We couldn’t get through,” I replied, although the question had been addressed to Brad. Mack didn’t like Brad, but me, he hated. It was almost as if he hated anybody who was smarter than he was. That meant he hated an awful lot of people. I think I was pretty close to the top of his list.

Mack looked at me, as if trying to think of a snappy comeback. It took him a while, but he finally said sarcastically, “You mean a smart kid like you can’t figure out how to use the radio?”

Kid. Mack was about thirty, and I was only a couple of years younger. Kid my ass. “Try yours,” I told him. I liked that. It was a challenge, so he had to accept it, but it also sounded like an order. I guess Mack realized it, too, because he took a few seconds to respond. At last, he must have figured that if he got through, he would show me up, because he pushed the Talk button on his radio. I was actually relieved when he was greeted with the same static Brad and I had heard.

“So now what?” Mack asked, his arsenal of ideas exhausted.

Brad looked up at the sky. It was already mid morning, and gray storm clouds were starting to gather. “The forecast said maybe snow this afternoon,” he said. Snow was a problem. In Oklahoma, a few inches could become deadly as the winds swirled the snow into tall drifts leaving glare ice on the road where the snow had been.

“Look,” I suggested. “There’s that town over there. Why don’t we go over there, get a phone and call Murray?”

No one questioned that suggestion. It meant that Murray would have to make the decision. That got all of us off the hook.

“Good idea,” Mack agreed. “I could use a cup of coffee.”

Bear grunted his agreement. Grunting was about all Bear ever did. He was even dumber than Mack, if that was possible.

“Okay,” Brad said, taking charge. “We can go down in your truck, Mack.”

Mack’s truck was a standard state Dodge with an extended cab, so we could all ride together. Mack looked a little uncomfortable, but finally agreed. “Let me move some stuff around,” he said, sauntering off toward the truck. He moved a briefcase out of the back seat and put it in the shotgun seat. He threw the keys to Bear and ordered, “You drive.”

I was thankful the trip was short. Extended cab pickups are okay for short trips, but Brad and I were practically eating our knees in the small back seat. In five minutes, we were driving into the town. A small sign with the picture of what looked like an eagle flying past an oak tree greeted us. ‘Ovid Welcomes You!’ the sign proclaimed. Underneath was a list of the usual civic clubs and their meeting dates: typical small-town stuff.

“Where the fuck is Ovid?” Mack asked, rattling his map.

“Right here, I guess,” Brad said laconically.

I had never heard of Ovid, and as an Oklahoma native, I thought I had heard of every town over five thousand in the state. This one was a new one on me, though. It was a pleasant little town, clean and fairly well kept. Winter is the worst time of the year to form an opinion of a town in Oklahoma. Everything is brown and gray with a dirty look to it. The trees always look like there isn’t any way they’ll leaf out again in the spring. Even the people look like they aren’t alive. The only saving grace in December is the Christmas decorations on the street lamps and buildings. Ovid wouldn’t exactly take any prizes for their displays, but the red and white candy canes and green Christmas trees hanging along light poles on the highway strip made the town look a little better.

“Stop there!” Mack told Bear, pointing to a small cafe which declared itself in neon to be ‘Rusty’s Best Burgers.’

“Burgers?” I questioned.

“So I’m hungry,” Mack growled in challenge. “So I suppose you want to go someplace where you can get an espresso and discuss philosophy?”

“Burgers will do fine,” I agreed reluctantly. At least I could get a cup of coffee.

Mack got out with the briefcase still in his tight grip.

“What have you got in there?” Brad asked suspiciously. Brad and I had talked about the Asshole Twins many times, and we suspected they might actually be selling drugs to the crews. Somebody was, we were told, but Brad and I had always stayed away from drugs. We also told no one about our suspicions regarding the Asshole Twins. It was none of our business.

“My lunch,” Mack muttered.

Brad looked Mack in the eye. “Look, I want to know, are you guys dealing? Because if you are, I don’t want to be here with that shit.”

“Of course not,” Mack sneered.

“Then how about opening the case?”

“No fucking way!”

Brad made a step toward Mack, and I followed, but before Brad could get to the case, Bear stepped in between. “He said no fuckin’ way,” Bear boomed, uttering what I suspected were his first words of the morning. We could see his arm muscles tighten as he doubled his fists.

I don’t know what would have happened next if the police hadn’t interfered. I think Brad would have gone after Bear. That would have left me to take Mack. I think I could have done it, but now, I’ll never know. We were all startled by the sudden short whine of a police siren, and turned as one to see a black and white police cruiser had pulled up directly behind our truck. None of us had even heard the car drive in.

“Shit!” Mack yelled, and turned to run. He never had a chance, though.

The cop was a blur of motion, running after him and grabbing his shoulder faster than any of us could blink. Mack turned, as if to hit the officer, then lowered his fist and appeared to be almost in a trance. I wondered why Bear hadn't run, but then I noticed that he, too, was standing as if in a trance.

"What the hell is going on here?" Brad asked in a voice barely above a whisper. He, at least, seemed normal.

"I don't know," I replied in an equally quiet tone.

The cop turned to face Brad and me. He was tall, maybe six three or so, and wore mirrored sunglasses. I wondered why since it was such a cloudy day that it seemed almost dark. In spite of his run to catch Mack, he wasn't even breathing hard, and not a hair was out of place. It was if he had just strolled over from his car to meet us.

"Into the car, guys," he ordered.

"Officer," Brad began, "our truck is a state vehicle and..."

"Don't worry about the truck," the cop interrupted. "It'll be taken care of."

"But the keys..." Brad protested.

"I said it would be taken care of," the cop said in a tone that allowed no further argument. With a shrug, Brad headed for the car, and I followed him.

Mack and Bear were already in the car. They were both still in some sort of trance as they sat together in the back seat. They had arranged themselves so I could squeeze in next to them while Brad got in front with the cop.

As we were driving away, I noticed something odd. There was another cop, or at least he looked like a cop, getting into our truck. He was wearing the same grayish blue shirt as the cop who had picked us up and, in fact, looked like his identical twin. The truck started right away and pulled out of the parking lot behind us, but I remembered seeing Bear pocket the keys, so how did he get it started? Bear and Mack looked like they were taking a mental vacation to the Caribbean, so

they didn't notice any of this, but Brad did. He just gave a small shrug that only I saw.

We drove off the highway down another business street. Gas stations and fast food joints gave way to one-story offices and small shops. After only a few blocks, we were in the main business district of Ovid. It consisted of one main business street, called unoriginally 'Main Street,' and a few businesses on the intersecting streets, but these trailed off after a block or so. A block or so west of the business district stood a gray granite building with Greek columns in front. The words 'City Hall' were carved into the granite above the columns. There was an Oklahoma flag flying next to the US flag in the grassy area in front of the building. It looked like your typical Midwestern municipal building.

The cop hadn't said a word to us. He hadn't read us our rights or explained why he had taken us in. I had no doubts, though, about what was in Mack's briefcase, and I was pretty sure the cop knew, too. But how had he known? And where had he come from? One moment, the four of us were ready to go at each other in the parking lot of some burger joint, and the next minute, there was a cop there ready to haul us in. It had to be some sort of a setup, but I couldn't figure out what. I looked at Brad in the front seat. He had the same suspicious look I was sure I had.

"Let's go, guys," the cop said, motioning us out of the car.

Mack and Bear led the way, almost as if they knew where they were going. Brad and I fell in after them with the cop, holding the briefcase, bringing up the rear. We walked into an area that looked familiar. It wasn't because I had been there before, but I had been in places like it. It was a police station. But the odd thing is that there was no one there except us. Usually, even in a small town like Ovid, there would be a couple of cops around. One would be on the front desk and another dispatching. I mean, even a town this size had to have a couple of police cars in motion all the time.

It was almost with relief that I saw another cop standing near the last cell in the cell block. He had the same tall, lean look of the other cops I

had seen in Ovid. It was almost as if they were all the same guy. Maybe the government had a secret cop factory someplace where they made these guys, I thought with a weird little mental twist. He was waiting for all of us to file into a cell, I realized. Mack and Bear marched dutifully toward the cell, but our escort suddenly put a hand on my and Brad's shoulders.

"You two come with me," he ordered. We were ushered into a small room with a conference table and a half dozen cheap conference chairs.

"What do you think is going on here?" I asked Brad after the cop had left, closing the door behind him.

"It's not a good idea to talk," Brad told me. "They may be listening."

"They? They who?" I asked, plopping down in the nearest chair.

"They—the cops. This is an interrogation room."

I looked around, then laughed, "What are you talking about? This is just a conference room. Look, there's no one-way glass and the furniture is too nice."

"Haven't you ever been in a police station before?" he asked calmly.

I shrugged. "Well, yeah, a couple of times," I conceded. "I mean, it was just minor stuff, though."

Brad sat next to me and looked at me with his most serious look.

"Okay, Marty, we'll play it your way. This is serious business. Do you know what was in that briefcase?"

"No," I replied, "but I can guess." Like I said, Brad and I had suspected the Asshole Twins of dealing. What was it? Pot? Coke? Something with initials? I didn't know, and I didn't want to know.

Brad nodded. "So can I. Now, you're the cops here in this little tank town and four scruffy guys show up out of nowhere with a briefcase full of illegal shit. What makes you think they'll believe only two of the guys were dealing?"

I shifted uncomfortably. He had a point. Before I could answer, the

door opened. It was the cop again, only this time, he was accompanied by an attractive woman. She was about five six or seven with long brown hair and a nice, athletic build which her gray dress accentuated and her matching gray jacket did little to hide. She had a conservative, professional look about her, emphasized by the glasses she wore, the one-inch heels, and the attaché case which she placed on the desk. That chore ended, she extended her hand, first to Brad and then to me. I noticed there was an engagement ring on her other hand. The good ones are always taken.

"I'm Susan Henderson," she said crisply. "I've been appointed as your Public Defender."

"Have we been charged with anything?" Brad asked innocently.

"Not yet," she conceded, "but it looks like you will be. Possession of drugs is the most likely charge. Your trial has been set for three this afternoon and that's bad. The Judge hates afternoon sessions and never schedules them, but the seriousness of the situation demanded it."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "What trial? I mean, I don't know that much about the law, but how can this be happening so quickly? It's not like this was a traffic offense or something."

She shook her head, looking almost uncomfortable with the way it moved across her ears and the side of her face. "You're right about that, but there's a lot you don't understand yet. Justice is pretty swift in Ovid. If you know what's good for you, you'll take all the help I can give you and not ask too many questions."

She was young, but sounded tough, almost as if she had done this hundreds of times before. I hadn't had much experience with lawyers, but I was rapidly gaining confidence in her. Brad wasn't as convinced, though, as he asked, "Don't we get the chance to get our own lawyer? I mean, no offense, but you look like you just got out of law school."

She gave a wry smile and replied, "Don't concern yourself, Mr. Blackstone. You and Mr. Collins here are in good hands. I have all the experience you'll ever need."

Somehow, I believed her, but Brad went on, "Look, lady, I don't want to go down for something I didn't do."

She seemed to wince at the term 'lady,' but she recovered quickly. "You almost sound as if there was something you did do that we should be concerned about."

It was as if she had hit Brad between the eyes with a hammer. All the bravado flowed out of him, and he slumped back wordlessly into his chair. Not for the first time, I wondered what there was in Brad's past that he was trying to hide.

"How about you, Mr. Collins?"

"No misgivings at all, Ms. Henderson," I said laconically.

She frowned for a minute. "You seem to have a better command of the language than I would have expected. Have you had some college?"

"No, ma'am," I replied. I wished that I did have some college. Then maybe I wouldn't be digging ditches. "I just read a lot."

She nodded. "Good. You and your friend here seem to have a much better demeanor than those two oafs you were with."

"Are you defending them, too?" I asked.

"No. They will be tried separately. Believe me, that is to your advantage."

I believed her, but I couldn't figure out what was going on. Why were we being tried so quickly on such a serious offense? Why weren't we being tried together? Had the Asshole Twins confessed? That didn't seem very likely. Had they feigned innocence and tried to shift the blame to us? That seemed very likely. Still, I was happy I wouldn't be on trial with them: guilt by association and all that.

When Brad and I said nothing, she continued, "Now, let's get down to the facts. That briefcase is loaded with cocaine." She paused for a moment before observing, "I notice that neither of you seem very surprised."

“We’re not,” Brad answered for us.

“You guys want to tell me what happened?” she asked.

We told her the entire story, switching off to verify each other’s statement every now and then. She took a page of notes, stopping occasionally to ask a question. When we had finished, she sat back in her chair. She looked me straight in the eye and said, “Now, give me one good reason why I should believe you.”

“Is that a rhetorical question?” I asked.

Her eyebrows went up. “Rhetorical? My, you are well read, aren’t you? And no, it isn’t rhetorical.”

“But I thought you didn’t have to believe us to defend us,” Brad observed.

She shifted uncomfortably. “I suppose I don’t, but I feel as if I can do a better job for you if I’m convinced of your innocence. Face it, things don’t look good for you. There’s fifty thousand dollars worth of cocaine in that briefcase. For all the court knows, you were getting ready to split it up and distribute it. Your two friends will try to pin it on you. You are trying to pin it on them. Usually, the courts decide everybody was involved. Punishments for drug dealers in Ovid can be very serious.”

“Look, ma’am,” I replied, “Brad and I were just doing our job. We don’t know anything about drugs. We don’t use them and we don’t sell them. You can look in my bank account or see how I live, and you’ll know I don’t make extra money selling drugs. Brad’s the same way. We were just questioning them on the contents of the briefcase when the cop stopped us.”

She was silent for a moment, looking back and forth at Brad and I with her big blue eyes. Damn, I would have given anything to be worthy of a woman like her. She had it all: intelligence, poise, looks, and an education. For at least the thousandth time in my life, I realized what a mess I had made of everything. Here I was, scruffy, uneducated, nearly broke, and now facing jail time for a crime I didn’t commit, all because when I was fifteen, I decided having fun was more important

than having goals.

At last, she sighed and said, "Okay, guys, we'll go with what we've got, but it isn't going to be easy. I'll be back here at a quarter 'til three. Then, we go to see the Judge."

We were led to a cell as far away from the Asshole Twins as possible, for which I was grateful. Those bastards had gotten us into more trouble than I could ever imagine. I tried to get some sleep, but I was too worried about the trial. Brad must have been the same way, for I could hear him tossing and turning in the bunk above me. I wondered what was in Brad's past that our attorney had speculated about. Maybe it was just woman's intuition, but she sensed something about him. I had never asked Brad, but I couldn't imagine Brad ever doing anything wrong. He was a real straight arrow.

I finally dozed off. It seemed like only a few minutes, though, before the cop who had picked us up called in, "Okay, you two, on your feet. The Judge is ready to see you now."

Why was it, I wondered as I pulled myself out of the uncomfortable prison bed, that whenever someone in this town said 'the judge,' it sounded more like 'the Judge' with a capital 'J'?

We were led out of the police station through the parking lot to the court wing. A receptionist smiled at us as we walked by. I did a double take at her because she seemed almost transparent. I don't mean like a ghost in the movies or anything. It was just that if you looked at her long enough, you could somehow tell what was obscured by her body. I thought my eyes must just be tired and playing tricks on me until Brad whispered, "Did you notice anything odd about the receptionist?"

"Yeah," I whispered back. "What's going on here anyway?"

"No talking," the cop said brusquely. He brought us to a halt outside a room with a bronze sign in front declaring it to be Courtroom 1. We waited there silently until I heard the outside door open. I looked around and saw another cop bringing in the Asshole Twins. The other cop left them in our cop's care, turned and returned to the police area, but I thought as he went that he looked enough like our cop to be his

twin. Great, we had twin cops to go with the Asshole Twins.

Mack and Bear were both unnaturally quiet. It was as if they were still in some sort of a trance. I didn't question it, though. I was just as happy to not have to talk with them. I had thought that we were being tried separately, so I wasn't happy to see them. Then, an unpleasant thought crossed my mind. What if they were there to testify against Brad and me? Our attorney was probably right. It was going to come down to our word against theirs.

The outside door opened again, only this time, there was the click of high heels. I turned and saw Susan Henderson approaching us with a look of grim determination on her face.

"I thought you said we were going to be tried separately from them," Brad challenged with a nod toward the Asshole Twins.

"No talking!" the cop yelled.

Our attorney turned to the cop and said, "Officer Mercer, I need to talk to my clients for a moment in private. I'll be personally responsible for them."

"All right," he agreed reluctantly, motioning to an adjacent conference room. "In there. But when the Judge is ready, I have to take them in right away."

She nodded. "I understand."

When we were seated and the door to the conference room closed, she began, "First of all, you are going to be tried separately, but you'll all face the Judge for sentencing at the same time. Your friends have already been tried and found guilty of possession of drugs. I know that sounds confusing, but the court system is a little different here in Ovid."

The way she said it, it sounded as if she was Alice speaking of Wonderland. I was really starting to get a bad feeling about this. She must have noticed, for she continued, "Look, I had lunch with the Judge's secretary. She told the Judge about my meeting with the two of you. He always listens to her, so he agreed to meet with me earlier

this afternoon. I've tried to get you the best deal I could."

"Like out of here and on our way home?" I ventured.

"If I can, but that may not be possible," she cautioned.

Terrific. Brad and I were about to be punished for something we didn't do. The Asshole Twins were probably going to testify against us to get lighter sentences. At least no matter what happened, maybe Murray could get us out of here. Murray! We had forgotten to call him. He'd probably fired us by now. "Look, Ma'am," I began, "we need to call our boss. He's probably looking for us right now."

She thought about it for a moment before replying, "That may not be a good idea."

"But we'll be in a lot of trouble!"

She shook her head. "Don't worry. It will be taken care of. Besides, I think I heard the courtroom door open."

She rose and opened the door. Although my vantage point wasn't very good, I saw another cop who looked like our Officer Mercer leading one of the homeliest men I had ever seen out of the courtroom. He was tall with a face that was almost unnaturally elongated. He seemed to be hunched forward, almost as if he found it difficult to walk. He coughed, making a rumbling sound almost like a horse. Then, he was gone, but I thought I heard a cry even more like a horse outside the building, followed by a clopping sound. When our attorney turned back to us, she was quite pale.

"Is there something wrong?" Brad asked.

She shook her head. "No, it's just that I don't think the Judge is in a very good mood today. Both of you need to be on your best behavior if we're going to come out of this okay."

The courtroom was very professional, almost to the point of being intimidating. At the bench sat a middle-aged man of perhaps fifty or a little more in the black judge's robe. He looked very scholarly in his gold rimmed glasses, but I could see there was an unhappy scowl on his face. He was shuffling a stack of papers as we were taken to the

defense table. The Asshole Twins were seated in the gallery directly behind us.

The only other spectator in the gallery was an attractive young woman. She was blonde and appeared to be in her mid twenties. She was dressed in a stylish brown suit. I wondered why she was in the courtroom. Maybe she was the attorney for the Asshole Twins. No, I thought, she wasn't sitting with them or even acknowledging their presence. Maybe she was with the local paper, assuming Ovid had one.

The judge looked up and rapped his gavel. "Court is now in session. Next case is the People versus Bradley Blackstone and Martin Collins." He looked sharply at our attorney. "Does that satisfy your desire for proper court procedure, Ms. Henderson?"

She actually smiled. "It's a start, Your Honor."

The judge actually smiled back. I wondered what was going on between those two. It was as if they were both enjoying a joke that we weren't able to understand.

"All right," the judge said, motioning for Brad and me to stand. When we had done so, he continued, "Mr. Blackstone and Mr. Collins, the court has already determined that your two associates bear the full responsibility for the possession and attempted sale of drugs. The question remaining before this court is your role in this entire affair."

"Your Honor," Ms. Henderson began, "the defense would like to stipulate that Mr. Blackstone and Mr. Collins had no knowledge of the contents of the briefcase and..."

"I'm well aware of that," the judge interrupted gruffly. Then to us, he asked, "Did either of you have any inkling that these other two men were dealing drugs?"

Brad and I were both silent. Yes, we both knew what they were up to, but it wasn't our business. We didn't want to get involved.

"Didn't want to get involved, eh?" the judge said, almost as if he could read our minds. Come to think of it, I realized, maybe he could.

“We didn’t know for sure,” Brad offered.

“Didn’t know for sure?” the judge repeated loudly. “But you suspected.” It wasn’t a question.

“Well, I guess,” Brad allowed.

“You guess!” the judge sneered, removing his glasses and staring at us. “Of course you guess. Wasn’t that part of the reason you call them ‘The Asshole Twins’?”

“Not really,” I replied truthfully. “We do that because... well, they are assholes.”

There was a sudden giggle which came from the direction of the blonde.

“While I might agree with that,” the judge said, looking sternly in the direction of the blonde, “you know very well that they were involved in illegal activities.”

Again, Brad and I were silent. Our attorney stepped in. “Your Honor, while they may have suspected illegal activities on the part of these other two men, without proof, they were under no obligation to report them.”

“And so, you are asking for...?” the judge said to her.

“Clemency,” she replied.

But the judge shook his head. “I will not grant clemency.”

Clemency? I wondered. Since when was not reporting someone a crime? Was this Nazi Germany or something? I could see the same confusion on Brad’s face.

“I will, however, be lenient,” the judge continued. “Now, I want all of the accused to approach the bench.”

Brad and I did so reluctantly, but Mack and Bear did so as if they were zombies, with a shuffling, mindless cadence. When we were all in place, the judge did something I had never expected—he began to speak in Latin. I didn’t know what he was saying, but I recognized a

word or two from my readings. As he spoke, I felt something almost like a chill in the room and felt my skin tingle. I wanted to see how the other guys were reacting, but for some reason, I couldn't turn my head. It seemed as if the lights were getting dim as well. I nearly panicked, wondering if something was physically wrong with me. Maybe the anxiety of the trial was having an effect on my body.

Then, suddenly, everything was normal again. The Judge, for I somehow realized he did indeed rate the capital 'J', rapped his gavel and gruffly muttered, "Court is adjourned!"

Do you remember the scene in the old science fiction movie, *Forbidden Planet*, where the ship has just dropped out of hyperspace and everyone is stumbling around groggy rubbing their heads? That's the way we all looked. Brad was rubbing his neck; Mack was looking around as if he had no idea of where he was, and Bear was... well, Bear was Bear. He just looked like he was not sure what planet he was on. Me? I felt kind of light-headed. I wasn't really myself. If only I had known then exactly how true that was.

"I'll walk you to your car," Officer Mercer said, making it sound more like "Go to your car—now!"

We didn't argue, but Mack at least was back to being his old obnoxious self. "Can you believe it? They let us go!"

"Yeah," Bear agreed, "but what about the brief...?"

"Quiet, you moron!" Mack ordered. Odd, I thought, but Mack's voice sounded a little higher.

I looked at Brad. He was still looking as if he was a little dazed. Also, he looked somehow different. I mean, he was still Brad, but he looked a little taller than me, and we were both the same height. Also, his hair looked a little curly instead of straight, and it appeared to be a couple of inches shorter than usual. My hair, on the other hand, felt a little longer. I reminded myself to get a haircut before the weekend, assuming we still had jobs. I looked at my watch. It was a little after four. We still had time to call Murray.

“Let’s find a phone,” I said to no one in particular. “We can still call Murray.”

“Who’s Murray?” Mack asked, his voice higher still. I looked at him. His brown hair seemed somehow lighter.

“Who’s Murray?” I repeated. “I’m talking about the guy who’s going to fire us if we don’t call in.”

Mack laughed a high-pitched laugh, “Oh, Myra, quit joking around.”

Myra? Who was Myra?

“Here you go,” Officer Mercer said, opening the door of a car I had never seen before. It was a Pontiac Grand Prix, dating from the early eighties. My dad had had one similar to it when I was a kid. It was a piece of shit then, and age had not improved this one. Its plum-colored metallic paint had faded badly, and there was a rough, unpainted smear of Bondo over the wheel wells where it appeared to have rusted, probably while Reagan was still President.

“What’s this?” I said to Officer Mercer in a voice that didn’t seem to be my own.

“Get in, Myra.” I felt a strong arm grip me from inside the car and pull me down into the front passenger seat. I turned to see Bear behind the wheel, holding onto my arm, only he wasn’t really Bear anymore. Instead of the greasy dark brown hair that had probably helped to give Bear his nickname, his hair was now blonde, and cut extremely close to the scalp. He was actually a little better looking, with clearer, younger features than I remembered. And if anything, he was bigger than before.

Officer Mercer closed my door. I felt almost as if he had awakened me from some weird dream, but if so, I had fallen back asleep into an even weirder one. I looked around into the back seat. Brad had changed still more. He was now a little taller and slimmer with dark, curly hair and deep brown eyes instead of his normal blue ones. He looked almost as if his ancestry was Italian instead of the English I knew it to be. Also, he was younger, looking perhaps sixteen.

But the real changes were happening to Mack. I knew it was Mack because he was still wearing the denim coveralls he had been wearing all day. Only now, they bulged out in odd places, notably at the hips and chest. He still had his normal face, but it looked a little softer and more rounded now. His hair, though—it was long, falling both in front of and behind his shoulders in soft blonde curls. As I watched him, his face began to change, becoming more and more feminine by the moment. Then, I could see traces of lipstick and eye shadow appearing, as if they were being drawn on his face by some invisible artist.

I looked back at Brad, but he was looking at me with wide eyes. Why? What was wrong with me? Then, I felt the changes. I had been so intently watching the other three that I had paid no attention to what was happening to my own body. I felt something tickling the back of my neck, and a sudden weight on my head. Then, there was a small pinching sensation at each of my ear lobes, and I felt an odd weight there, as if something was swinging back and forth at the bottom of my ears. When I blinked my eyes, it was as if there was something dark on my eyelashes, causing them to be thicker. There was a sudden taste, almost a sweet perfumed taste, on my lips. Blonde hair began to cascade down my back and over my shoulders.

But it was the rest of my body that I could actually see. My gray work shirt was now a tightly-knitted white sweater, which did nothing to disguise two mountains growing on my chest. It was almost as if they were heavy balloons heaving up and down as I gasped in surprise. At the end of the sleeves were two delicate, feminine hands with long red nails. My jeans had fused into a single tube of leather, which was shrinking up toward my expanded hips, leaving behind two feminine legs encased in dark nylon. I lifted a foot far enough to see a black pump with a two-inch heel covering a dainty foot. Jesus H. Christ! I screamed inside my mind, this just wasn't possible! I had been changed into a girl!

"Usual place?" the mountain of a teenager Bear had become said.

No one said a word. Brad and I were too busy staring at each other,

and the buxom blonde girl Mack had become was too busy snuggling against Brad to say anything.

“Jack, Damn it! I’m talking to you!” Bear said sharply.

As the only other male in the car, Brad thankfully took his cue. “Yeah, sure the usual place.”

Bear turned the car sharply through a wide metal gate. I could see the name ‘Sooner Park’ in black wrought iron letters at the top of the sign. It had started to snow as we made our way down into a small forest of oak trees. Without warning, Bear wheeled the car into a secluded side road, sliding slightly on the thin coating of new snow. He put the car in park, and wordlessly slipped his meaty paws under my sweater.

“Stop it!” I screamed, surprising him so much that his hands actually retreated.

“Hey, what’s the problem?” a high-pitched voice called from the back seat. I looked around to see Brad frozen in shock and a blonde bimbo unzipping his fly with her face no more than a foot from his crotch.

“Yeah, Myra,” Bear agreed. “What’s the fuckin’ problem?” I was almost relieved to see he was hardly a class act no matter what body he wore. It gave me a sense of stability in a topsy-turvy world.

Bear had given me my cue, though. I was obviously Myra. I had to come up with an answer. Let’s see, what was the most devastating response to this any girl had ever given to me. Think!

“Uh,” I began, “I... I’ve got the cramps.”

Bear looked stricken.

“Yeah,” I went on, getting into the spirit of the thing. “I’m getting my period!”

“But it ain’t time for your period,” Bear protested.

“It’s early!” I insisted.

“Oh, shit!” He slumped into his seat and hit the dash with his fist, rattling the entire car. Then his face brightened, as if the one thought

he would be able to manage all month had finally crawled through his thick skull. An evil grin appeared on his face as he turned to me. I wasn't going to like this. "Then blow me."

I knew I wasn't going to like it. Think again! I had to be able to outwit this dunce. Yes! I had it! "You don't understand," I wailed, "I don't have a tampon. I'm going to bleed all over the seat."

I figured the car had to be his, and piece of shit that it was, it had to be his pride and joy. The thought of menstrual blood all over his cheap seats was enough to offset the need to have his raging hard on sucked. I could see in his eyes that he couldn't wait to get me home.

"Oh crap!" That was from the girl in the back seat. I looked back at her and saw her, arms folded in disgust. Brad, on the other hand, looked at me with something resembling relief. Although he had said nothing, I knew that Brad and I both knew that this was not the same reality we had been a part of only a few hours before.

Bear dropped me off first. In spite of the fact that I was probably his girl, the need to get me out of the car before I bled all over his precious upholstery outweighed any other strategy he might have had. We had pulled up in front of a white two-story house in a nice, middle-class neighborhood. Since the winter day had already turned dark, I could see through the windows into lighted rooms. The house looked warm and cozy. I didn't care if there was an axe murderer living there. Anything was better than spending another minute in the car with this newer, younger Bear.

"Wait, I'll walk you to the door," the girl in back said as I opened the car door.

I nearly stumbled getting out of the car in my new high heels. At least thank God they weren't any higher. This was like a nightmare. I could imagine Bear getting out of the car to chase me while I stumbled in unfamiliar shoes.

"Take your books," Bear said gruffly without even looking at me. I looked at the floorboard beneath my seat and saw a small book bag and a woman's leather jacket next to it. I grabbed both and started

unsteadily toward the house we had pulled up in front of. If I could have managed, I would have run to the door. Anything to get away from Bear.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” the blonde who had been Mack whispered loudly to me as we walked to the door.

“My period,” I said tersely.

“Bullshit!” she said. “Your period is never early. It’s always the same time as mine, and that’s not for another two weeks.”

Oh, goody. There was something to look forward to.

She pulled my arm. “Look, Bull is pissed at you now, and you know what that means.”

I didn’t, but I had a pretty good idea.

“Myra, he’s the best catch in the school. He was already being looked at by college scouts this last year, and he’s only a Junior. He’ll probably be listed as the top football prospect in the nation for center after next season. And he’s crazy about you. Play your cards right and you’ll be the wife of a pro football player. You know what that means, don’t you?”

Sure I did. It meant that a drug-running scumbag like Bear was being rewarded by being turned into a hotshot college football prospect while innocent little old me got to be his would-be blushing bride. The Judge was behind this. Oh, excuse me, Mr. Judge, but I think you got your wires crossed. I’m the good guy; he’s the bad guy.

“Myra, say something!”

Okay, it was time for me to do something to recover this situation before I made a total fool of myself. Thus far, I was only about an eighty percent fool. I tried the old tired smile look. “Hey, I’m sorry... (I had no idea what her name was). I just don’t feel good, okay?”

It worked. She melted a little and put her hand on mine. “Okay. I’ll call you later. I’ll back up your story with Bull. Everything will be fine by morning.”

We smiled at each other. Then, with a little wave, she ran back to the car. She barely got the door slammed before Bear's, or apparently now Bull's tires squealed away from the curb. Great. I was a girl with a mountain of a boyfriend who thought he was Mario Andretti.

I got to the door and read the bronze plaque on the door. It said: 'The Smithwicks.' So apparently that was my last name in this strange new reality: Smithwick, Myra Smithwick. I sighed. I guess it was better than Hermione Grubbermeister. So I had a full name. That was one problem solved.

Next problem. I didn't have a key. Or at least I didn't think I did. I checked the pockets of the leather jacket. No key. I was freezing out here and the snow was starting to come down harder. Finally, I rang the doorbell.

I was greeted by a forty-something woman with brown hair just starting to go gray. She was dressed in a conservative white blouse and navy blue skirt and looked as if she had just gotten home from work. She had a kindly look, but it was marred by flashes of concern and bottled-up anger. Also, she was one of the transparent people.

"Myra!" the woman said with honest concern. "Where have you been? It's been snowing hard for over an hour, and you promised to be home early. And where is your key?"

This was a new experience for me. When I was in high school, I came and went as I pleased. Mom was a waitress and often worked late, and dad's schedule was always screwed up, too. I'd get home, fix myself something to eat, and then take off to party. Nobody cared. What was this woman doing getting so steamed up? I could take care of myself. Then, remembering my recent experiences in the car, I realized that maybe I couldn't take care of myself so well after all.

"I'm okay," I said emphatically, but actually a little warmed by her concern. "I was just out with some friends."

"You were out with that Bull Brewster, weren't you?" she asked sternly. Then, without waiting for an answer, she continued, "I wish you wouldn't spend so much time with him. I really don't think he's a

very nice boy. Some of the other mothers have told me he doesn't treat girls very well."

I could testify to that. So, this woman was supposed to be my mother. No surprise there, I guess. I knew I was being chewed out, but I didn't seem to mind. For one thing, we agreed that I shouldn't spend so much time with Bull Brewster. As far as I was concerned, one second with him out of the rest of my life (either life) was one second too many. I didn't answer her, though. Until I learned more about who I had become, I didn't want to appear out of character, so I just listened. My 'mother' didn't seem to be looking for answers from me anyway.

"And where is your key?" she demanded.

"Uh... I don't know," I replied. I was confident with that answer. I didn't have the slightest notion where my key was.

"You didn't leave your purse somewhere, did you?"

Oh shit! I was a girl now, and girls carried purses. I must have left it in Bull's car, I thought. How would I get it back? There was a sick feeling in my new stomach.

Mother was going through my book bag, and in a moment, she produced a small brown leather purse. "Well, at least your purse is still here. Did you lose your key out of... Oh, no. Here it is," she said, producing a small ring of keys. "Why didn't you use it?"

I felt the sick feeling going away. At least I wouldn't have to get my purse back from Bull. "Well, I guess..."

"Oh, never mind," she said with a sigh. "Now I need your help in the kitchen. Your father will be home from the plant any minute now. But before you come in to help me, get out of that outfit. You know your father hates it."

Gee, I thought, he and I were going to see eye to eye on that. I couldn't wait to get out of this outfit. Thank god girls wore jeans. There had to be a pair in Myra's room, if I could just find her room.

Finding 'my' room proved not too difficult. All I had to do was find the bedroom done in pastels with a closet that looked like the Frederick's

of Hollywood warehouse. Didn't this Myra own anything that wasn't sexy and either way too tight or way too short? I managed to find a red and white University of Oklahoma sweatshirt, a pair of jeans, and some tennis shoes with, of all things, pink shoelaces. It looked like the most conservative stuff was in Myra's wardrobe. Oh well, I sighed to myself, it was better than a leather skirt and high heels.

This was my first chance to get a good look at myself, and I wasn't pleased with what I saw. I was about medium height. I was very attractive in a cheap sort of way. My hair was too blonde, probably lightened. I wore way too much makeup, especially around my deep blue eyes. My outfit looked as if it had been painted on the large breasts, tiny waist, and flared hips. My legs, as the old saying goes, went all the way down. I looked as if I should be singing that old Julie Brown song, 'I'm a Blonde.' I had to tone this look down in a hurry.

I stripped out of my sexpot outfit, finding to my disgust that my underwear consisted of a black lace bra and French-cut panties. Also, I was wearing a garter belt and stockings. I wondered if 'Mom' knew about all this hot babe stuff under the skirt. I was sure she probably did, but what could she do? Chastity belts had been out for centuries, and I was sure Myra wasn't the only high school girl wearing something this provocative. In fact, when I had been in high school, I had known quite a number of them—some of them, ahem, quite well. Was that what kind of a girl I had become? That didn't sound very promising. I remembered when some of my sisters had started dressing this way. It hadn't taken them long to end up pregnant.

I certainly had the body for this kind of an outfit, I realized. I was blonde with deep blue eyes and that peaches and cream complexion that other girls would kill for. As for makeup, Myra apparently liked a lot of it. I managed to look at the size of my bra. It was a 36D. Pretty hefty for a—what?—sixteen-year-old. The entire body would be a candidate for a centerfold in a few years. I could see it now. Here she is, Playmate of the Year—Myra Smithwick. Thank you. My turn-ons are sexy guys with tight buns and my turn-offs are girls who go after my guys. When I get out of reform school, I want to be a rocket scientist. It

was enough to make me want to throw up.

At least, I thought, the sweatshirt and jeans would tone the look down a little bit. I slipped on the sweatshirt, relieved to see that it was baggy enough to disguise at least a little of the voluptuousness of the breasts. The jeans were another matter, though. I had to tug them over my now-ample hips since my waist was so much smaller. These weren't the kind of jeans I was used to as a guy. They clung to every part of my lower anatomy like paint. It was better than the skirt, though. I added the sweat socks and tennis shoes, and that made me feel a little more normal than seeing those small, dainty feet with their red toenails.

I looked in the mirror at the final effect. With the makeup, long blonde hair, and large hoop earrings that I had no idea how to remove, no one would mistake me for a man, but at least I didn't look like the crown princess of the bimbos anymore.

"Myra, I need your help!"

Okay, I thought, time to play the part. I was going to have to be Myra Smithwick—maybe forever. I guessed I would have to play her well until I could figure out what else to do. As I slowly walked down the stairs, I kept thinking how unfair this was. I was an honest guy, yet here I was in the body of a bimbo while Bull was still male. Maybe the Judge had made a mistake. I mean, he changed four people all at once. Maybe Bull was supposed to be the blonde, and like Brad, or rather, Jack, I was supposed to still be male. That would have made a lot more sense.

'Mother' was in the kitchen, doing about four things at once. I could smell the aroma of meat cooking, and could see three salad bowls laid out filled with lettuce and tomato wedges. A vegetable—it looked like green beans—was in a bowl, ready to be served, with a dollop of butter melting down over it. My stomach growled. Male or female, I began to realize I had eaten nothing since an early morning breakfast with Brad.

"Here," she said handing me a bowl of steaming potatoes. "Mash

these, and make drinks for everyone. I just talked to your father, and he'll be here any minute."

I took the potatoes without question and began to mash them. As a bachelor, I knew my way around a kitchen when I had to, although I would usually settle for an unhealthy portion of a burger and fries either alone or with somebody like Brad, washed down with a couple of beers.

My ersatz mother was bustling so vigorously that I wondered what kind of a man my 'father' was. Did he expect this type of service every night? Maybe he was like that guy in the Julia Roberts movie who insisted all the towels be straight. I shuddered at the thought. On top of Bull the Ape Man, that's all I would need—a domineering father. I had visions of him with Bull, the two of them smoking cigars, while my 'father' told him, "That's right, son. When I turn her over to you, you be sure to keep her in line, you hear?"

The rumble of the automatic garage door brought me out of my waking nightmare. I nearly dropped the potatoes in the process.

"Myra! I think those potatoes have been mashed enough. You haven't even started to make drinks. Oh, never mind, sit down. I'll do it."

The door between the kitchen and the garage opened, and for the first time, I saw my 'father.' He appeared to be about the same age as my 'mother.' He stood about six feet tall, I guessed, given that I appeared to be about five four. He was relatively trim with just the hint of middle age spread. He was wearing a dark suit and a conservative tie. He had short hair that was mostly gray with a matching moustache. What impressed me most, though, were his eyes. Like mine, they were blue, but although they looked tired from the stress of a long day, they had a warmth that made me regret the terrible things I had imagined. One more thing about him: unlike 'Mom,' he was not transparent.

"How are my two girls today?" he asked, giving 'Mom' a hug. Then, looking at me, he asked, "What, I don't get a hug?"

I don't think I had ever hugged my real father, or for that matter, even my mother after I was about twelve. I hesitated for a moment before

reminding myself that until I sorted everything out, I had a role to play. With a forced smile, I stepped over to him and gave him a hug. He hugged back, firmly, but not uncomfortably. For just a moment, I felt something I had not felt in a long time. I felt safe.

“Sit down; dinner’s ready,” Mom said. I suddenly realized I actually thought of her for a moment as my mother. And why not? I wasn’t close to my real parents. I hadn’t seen them in over three years, or even talked to them for that matter. If I had to be stuck in Ovid for a while, I supposed it might as well be with people who seemed to be loving parents. Since I had no visible means of support, being someone’s teenage daughter was probably the best strategy.

I waited until my new parents had seated themselves before taking my place at the table, since I had no idea where Myra normally sat. I wondered if Myra had been one of the transparent people before I was transformed. I imagined that she was.

As we ate, everyone talked about his or her day. Dad was apparently a mid-level executive at something called Vulman Industries. As nearly as I could tell, they made car parts, but I could have been wrong about that. Mom was a receptionist/secretary for a law firm, and she seemed to be happy with her job. She never mentioned the firm she worked for, but talked instead about a couple of cases they were working on. I didn’t pay much attention, though, since I had no idea who the people she was talking about were.

“How about you, honey?” Dad asked, looking at me.

I had been absorbed in my dinner. The pork chops and vegetables were among the best I had ever eaten. Even with a much lighter feminine appetite, I had been concentrating heavily on the delicious dinner. “Me?” I said stupidly after swallowing a bite of meat.

“Who else do I call ‘honey’?” he said with a smile. “By the way, I’m glad to see you’ve decided to dress a little more conservatively. Now, if I could just talk you into lightening up on that makeup...”

I’m sure the old Myra would have groaned, “Oh, Dad!” Not me. I didn’t like wearing this much makeup either. I just nodded and said, “I’ll try.”

For the reaction I got, I think 'I'm pregnant' would have been less of a shock to them. What kind of a person was Myra before I came on the scene? I had a hunch she was practically an apprentice streetwalker. Bull seemed to expect me to spread my legs on command, and my parents expected me to always do the opposite of what they wanted. I didn't know if I was cut out to be a model daughter, but apparently, I was something of an improvement.

Dad finally recovered. "Great. Now, how was school?"

What could I say? I had never been there. I assumed I was a sophomore or junior since Bull was a junior. I couldn't have been any younger—not with a body like mine, and Bull didn't seem the type to date older women. I just shrugged. "It was okay."

This seemed to be a comment more in line with what they expected.

When dinner was finished, I found out it was my responsibility to do the dishes. That didn't bother me. It was a lot easier work than preparing a meal. My only slip-up was forgetting to put on the rubber gloves before sticking my hands in the hot dishwater.

"Myra, don't do that!" Mom cried in horror. "You'll ruin your nails."

I supposed I would, but it had never occurred to me before. My short male nails weren't affected adversely by the hot water. In fact, it was a way to soak out the dirt and grime that had accumulated during the day. As a man, my hands were callused and rough. Hot water didn't bother them at all. As a girl, though, the soft skin stung in the hot water, and I realized that if I soaked my nails very long, they would become too soft and lose their shape. Something told me there was going to be a lot to remember if I was successfully to maintain this new identity.

Mom and dad retreated to the den to watch TV. I told them I had studying to do. That evoked another odd stare. Apparently, Myra didn't study much. Actually, I just wanted to get away for a while so I would not have to continue the masquerade. I opened the book bag to see what books Myra had brought home. To my surprise, there was only a notebook and a romance novel. No wonder my purse had fit in there

so easily. I was about to examine the purse when I hear the doorbell ring. A moment later, Mom called up, "Myra, there's a young man here to see you."

Oh my god, I thought. It had to be Bull. I didn't want to see him. I would have to go down and give him another story about my period. With a heavy sigh, I went downstairs to face Bull. Imagine my surprise when I saw it wasn't Bull at all. Instead, it was Brad—or rather, Jack. In his high school letter jacket of black with a gold 'O' on it and the stack of books tucked under his arm, he looked like a Norman Rockwell version of American youth. I grinned when I saw him, and he grinned back. I had been right! He remembered who he had been.

"Let's go in the living room and talk," I told him. The living room was the room furthest from the den, so with the TV turned up, my new parents wouldn't be able to hear what we said.

"I thought we could study together," he said when we had settled in on the couch. "It's been a long time since I've been in school, so it's going to take some time to get back into it."

"You sound as if you've decided to be Jack all the way," I observed, a little disturbed that he was taking all of this so rationally.

He nodded. "I suspect we're stuck here, so I figured I'd make the most of it. I didn't get the chance to finish high school, and now I do. I'm fine with this new life. You sound as if you're not."

"Not really," I replied. "It's all too weird for me. I don't know if I can face it."

"Oh, come on, Marty, show some balls. You have to face it."

"Show some balls?" I repeated loudly. "It's funny you should say it that way. I seem to have misplaced mine. If I remember my biology correctly, what's left of them have travelled inside my body and set up shop as a baby factory. Add to that, I have a possessive boyfriend with the IQ of a large fireplug and a physique to match. And the way I was dressed today tells me I can expect Bull and the baby factory to get together any day now. With all of that going on, you're telling me to

face it?”

Jack turned a little red and looked down. I took it as my cue to continue. “To make it even more fun, I don’t have a clue as to how to apply makeup or put on a bra or fix my hair or shave my legs or any of a hundred different things a girl has to know every day. You, on the other hand, just have to figure out how to get to football practice.”

“Okay,” he finally said, “you’re right. I’ve got it a lot easier than you do, but look on the bright side. You’re a sixteen year old again. You can start to live a critical part of your life over again. Maybe this time you’ll do it better. Sure, you have to wear skirts, but you don’t break your back digging ditches.”

“But I’m a girl,” I argued.

“So?”

“You wouldn’t be so glib about it if it were the other way around,” I muttered.

“You’re probably right. But this is the way it is. Now, do you want to study with me for the history test?”

“What history test?”

He sighed, “The one we’re scheduled to have right after lunch tomorrow. Didn’t you look in your book bag?”

I batted my eyes and gave my best Valley Girl imitation. It was frightening how accurate it sounded. “Well, like, you know, Myra’s not really into this study thing.”

“So you don’t have your history book.”

“No, and how do you know about it anyway? And how are you so sure I’m even in your class?”

“Jack is apparently a little better organized than Myra. I found the test notification in my notes, and there was a class roster taped to the front of the notebook. You’re on it.”

A sudden pang of fear struck me. I had had the dream in which you

show up for class and don't have the foggiest idea what you're supposed to be doing. I think everybody has had that dream. Although, this time, it was for real. I had no idea what class I was supposed to be in or what to do once I got there. Jack saw the fear on my face. "What's wrong?"

I told him the problem. He thought about it for a moment and suggested, "Maybe there's a schedule in your room."

I thought about what I had seen in my new room. It was feminine; that I remembered, but I couldn't think of... "Wait a minute. There's a desk in my room. It doesn't look as if it gets much use, but maybe Myra stuffed a class schedule in there."

"Let's go look," Jack advised.

It took some doing, but we found it. It was stuck in the bottom of a desk drawer with some other school papers.

"It looks like you're in most of the classes I'm in," Jack said as he read the schedule over my shoulder. He was so much taller than I now was, that this feat presented no problem. He was right. I was scheduled for American History at the same time he was. In addition, I had English and Government in the morning and Chemistry and Algebra later in the day. I had always been pretty good in subjects such as History and Government, and when it came to English, I had always been a voracious reader (I mean, how many ditch diggers knew what voracious even meant?), so that subject would present no problem. When it came to chemistry, though, I didn't know a proton from an electron, and math had always been hard for me. If I were completely honest with myself, however, I would have to admit that both of those subjects had bored me, so I hadn't paid attention when the fundamentals were explained.

"Any problems?" Jack asked.

"Algebra and Chemistry," I told him.

"Don't worry," he replied. "Those are my best subjects. I need help in things like History. I never was very good at memorizing dates and

names.”

“That’s because you’re going about it all wrong,” I told him.

“How so?”

“Well,” I began, “History isn’t so much about memorizing dates and names as it is about understanding events. If you understand that England was invaded by Normans who held claim to English land, then 1066 AD and William the Conqueror are just the date and name you hang on the event. You’ll see, it’s easier that way.”

Jack looked at me with newfound admiration. “I didn’t know you were good at this stuff. Why didn’t you go on in school?”

“The truth is,” I explained, “I was bored.”

“Bored?”

“Yeah. My IQ is measured at 165. That puts me way up there.”

“And you flunked out of high school?” he asked incredulously.

I shook my head, startling myself with the feel of the long blonde curls sweeping along my neck. “No, I didn’t flunk out. I probably would have, though, to be honest. I hate to whine about this, but most public schools have lots of programs for slow learners, but they don’t know what to do with the fast ones. They let them get bored and underachieve. There are members of Mensa, the club for people with high IQs, who sweep floors for a living.”

“Or dig ditches,” Jack added.

I flushed. “Yeah, or dig ditches. I went to school in Tulsa, in the inner city. Tulsa isn’t all that big compared to Chicago, but it’s big enough to have poor schools in the inner city. There was never enough money even to teach the basics, let alone handle guys like me. And my parents didn’t care. I was just one more mouth to feed. If I dropped out of school, I’d have to go to work and stop being a burden to them.”

“Sounds rough,” he commented.

“It didn’t seem so at the time,” I said, really thinking about it for the first

time in years. "It just seemed... normal. Now, though, I'm not so sure."

"Well, you're a lot brighter than I am," Jack told me.

I shocked myself by putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. "No, Jack, that isn't so. You're very bright, too. I know we never talked about it, but I think that's why we've been friends. Let's face it, we were always the oddballs on the crew. Most of the guys just lived for boobs, beers and burgers." And now, I was the boobs, I thought darkly. "You must have dropped out for about the same reasons."

"Well, I wasn't as bright as you. My IQ is in the 130's."

"But that's pretty high, too. Were you bored, too? Is that why you dropped out?"

Jack shifted uncomfortably, causing me to pull back my hand. "Not really. Look, I'd rather not talk about it if it's okay with you. And I really need to study for this test. I'll make you a deal. When we're done, I'll help you with the math and science, okay?"

I smiled. "Sure. Let's do it."

The evening passed quickly but productively. The History test was going to be on the American Civil War. That had always been one of my favorite periods. I had read Bruce Catton's and Shelby Foote's books on the subject, and considered myself something of an expert. I was able to walk Jack through most of the important details, and in about an hour, I pronounced him ready to take the test. Then, we disposed of English and Government. Government was an easy course. Jack understood that it was taught by an assistant coach who would rather be playing basketball. He had heard that from Bull (who was in the class with all the other jocks) and Mikki. It turned out Mikki was the former Mack's new name.

"She doesn't remember a thing about her old life," Jack told me.

"She's just a bimbo looking for a jock to hold onto. Apparently I'm the jock."

"So what did you two do after Bull dropped me off yesterday?" Why

did I want to know that? It was none of my business, but the way she was clinging to him made me... jealous? No, just curious.

"Nothing much," Jack said simply. "Bull dropped us off together. Mikki wanted me to come back to her house. She just lives a couple of blocks beyond me. I begged off, though. Her parents weren't home, and it was obvious she wanted some action."

"And you didn't?" I asked, now genuinely curious.

He shook his head. "Not that way. Maybe later, when I've got things figured out around here, but I smelled a rat. Why was Mikki changed into a bimbo just for me? I know you're not supposed to look a gift horse in the mouth, but I've been suspicious most of my life. Just because I've been given a new body doesn't mean that I won't still be that way."

Next, we looked at English. Apparently, we were reading a Shakespearean play in class, so we could catch up on the fly. I had already read just about every play he had ever written, so I was on home turf there.

Before we could tackle Chemistry and Algebra, Mom came in. She looked pleasantly surprised that we were studying so industriously. "I've made some hot chocolate," she announced, "and there are still some of the cookies I baked yesterday. Why don't you two take a little break?"

We did, but it only took a moment to see Mom's true motive. She sat with us in the kitchen with her own cup of chocolate. Dad had apparently already gone up to bed, so we were now the evening's entertainment. It was obvious she wanted to learn more about Jack. She subtly questioned him about his family (she knew them already—Ovid was a small town), how he was doing in school, what his hobbies were, and so on.

Jack was very glib, considering the fact that I was certain he was making up a lot of it as he went along. I had been in his situation when I was in high school (or maybe I should say the first time I was in high school). I knew this was an interview for the position of Myra's

boyfriend. Fat chance of that, I thought. Apparently I already had one of those, and I wanted to get rid of him as quickly as I could.

The third degree—Mom style—out of the way, Jack and I retired to the living room to work on Chemistry and Algebra. With Jack there to explain it, it wasn't hard to pick up on either subject. I had never paid much attention to either subject the first time around. These subjects were the last ones I had taken before dropping out of school, and my mind really wasn't on them. Now, though, they seemed to make sense. It was as if I had been wandering around in the dark and someone had turned on the light. Of course! That's how it works. I hadn't really understood this or that before.

At last, Mom, came into the living room. "Don't you think you two should call it a night?" she asked. "It's late, and you both have to go to school in the morning."

"What time is it?" I asked as I finished the last assigned algebra problem.

"Nearly midnight."

"We should call it a night," Jack said, closing his book. "If you want, we can work on this tomorrow evening."

"Not tomorrow evening," Mom told him. "Myra is going with us to the pre-nuptial dinner for my boss."

Pre-nuptial dinner for her boss? I hadn't known anything about that. Wait a minute, I thought. She worked for a lawyer, and the lawyer who had defended us was wearing an engagement ring. It had to be. There couldn't be that many engaged lawyers in Ovid.

"Well, then maybe this weekend," Jack suggested.

"Sure," I agreed readily. "I'll see you to the door."

It was still snowing out, but not too hard. I looked at the curb and didn't see a car. "Where's your car?"

He smiled. "I walked. It's only about three blocks."

We just stared at each other, basking in our mutual friendship. It was us against Ovid. I was actually starting to think I could make it with Jack's help. Finally, Jack said, "G'night," and turned away with a wave.

"Good night," I called after him. I was really sorry to see him go.

"He's a very nice boy," Mom said as I closed the door.

"I think so, too," I agreed. "We're good friends."

Mom was thoughtful for a moment before saying, "He's certainly a lot nicer than that Bull you've been dating. I'm glad to hear you talk about someone else. All you usually have to talk about is Bull this and Bull that."

Boy, I must have been a space case to do that.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she said suddenly. "That Mikki called up a little while ago. She said you were supposed to call her. I forgot to give you the message."

Read that as "I didn't want to give you the message, especially while you were with Jack."

"I guess you can go one night without talking to her for hours instead of studying."

"I guess I can." Actually, I couldn't think of anything to talk to her about for more than thirty seconds. She might have been significantly different from Mack, but I suspected I wouldn't like her any better. She was a bimbo from the word go. Actually, I suppose I was, too, at least in the eyes of my new contemporaries. I could see us now, Bimbette and Bimbina, the Bimbo Twins. Yeah, sure.

Mom trundled off to bed, leaving me alone at last. I went back to my room, so tired I could barely keep my eyes open. It had been a long and eventful day, and all I could think about now was going to bed. As I pulled down the covers, I... Wait a minute. I was ready for bed. I was wearing a horribly frilly pastel yellow nightgown. My mouth felt fresh as if my teeth had just been brushed. The growing pressure in my bladder was gone, and a look in the mirror told me that I had washed

off all my makeup. The problem was, I hadn't consciously done any of those things. That meant the same magic that had changed me into Myra was still at play. It must have been like training wheels on a bike, helping you to balance until you could figure out how to do it yourself.

If I thought about it, I could remember everything I had actually done. I could remember going to the bathroom for the first time as a girl. I could remember carefully wiping myself, as if I had done it all my life. I could remember looking at my face in the mirror as I removed my makeup. I could remember all of these things, but I couldn't remember what I had been thinking about at the time. I would have to be careful in the morning, I realized, or Myra would be back to the bimbo look without any intervention from me. As I drifted off to sleep, I began to think the next day might easily be the longest day of my life.

"Myra, you're oversleeping!"

At first, I didn't recognize the voice, but then I realized it was my new Mom. With a groan, I started to wake up, immediately remembering the events of the previous day. It hadn't been a dream, and I hadn't expected it to be.

"Did you forget to set your alarm?" she asked as I pulled myself out of bed. The sudden sway of heavy breasts was unnerving.

"I guess so," I said sleepily. Actually, I hadn't even thought about it.

"What time is it?"

"Six fifteen," she said. "Your ride will be here in an hour."

But an hour would be plenty of time, I thought. Then, I remembered that as a girl, I would have to spend a lot more time getting ready. There was long hair to contend with, makeup, accessories, and clothes to select. I wasn't looking forward to the process.

Still, I managed. I even found a few minutes to wolf down some cereal and drink some juice. I found if I let myself go in the shower, my built-in programs took care of everything. I was more aware of how they worked now, so I was able to exhibit a little self-control. I picked out my own outfit, consisting of a cream-colored sweater and another pair

of tight jeans. I stayed with the tennis shoes I had found the night before. I actually got pretty good at attaching earrings and picking the right accessories. The only trouble I had was makeup. My program wanted me to apply it thick and heavy like the day before, but I was able to force myself to apply a little less. It was still more than I wanted, but significantly less than the day before.

I gave myself the once-over in the mirror. I was still one hot babe, and all the light makeup, jeans and tennis shoes in the world couldn't disguise that. I was ready to face the world. Mom had said my ride would be there at seven fifteen, and I was standing by the door with five minutes to spare. I even remembered to grab my purse.

"Be home right after school," she told me. "We have to get ready for Susan's dinner tonight."

"I will, Mom," I said cheerily as a horn honked outside. Bull was behind the wheel. Damn! I had hoped he wasn't going to be my ride, but I wasn't surprised. To my relief, Mikki and Jack were already in the back seat.

I jumped in the front seat and was suddenly surprised as a big, beefy arm closed around my shoulders and pulled me to face Bull. "Hiya, babe," he said with a grin, planting a sloppy kiss on my lips before I could stop him. The bastard actually pressed my lips so hard that I thought they were going to be forced back through the spaces between my teeth. It hurt like hell. I pulled away before he could force his tongue into my mouth. Now, I'd have to redo my lipstick, too.

"What's your problem this morn...?" His voice trailed off as he looked at me. "What did you do to your face?"

I shrugged. "Nothing, really."

"It looks different. You don't look as sexy."

Now, if I had been a girl all my life, I'm sure I would have been hurt by this comment. Considering my circumstances, though, I felt as if it was the first complimentary thing Bull had said to me. I didn't want to look as sexy. Well, maybe that wasn't accurate. I just didn't want to look

like Bull's definition of sexy. Wait a minute, I thought to myself, just whose definition of sexy was I trying to look like?

"And what's with the pants?" Bull roared. "I thought I told you I didn't want to see you ever wear pants when you were with me."

"Look," I yelled right back at him, "it's cold out. There's a foot of snow on the ground and pants are warm."

"Get out and get changed!" he ordered.

I have to admit, I was frightened. Here I was, a slip of a girl, yelling at a guy more than twice my size and god only knew how much stronger than I was. He could hurt me. He could hurt me very badly and not even work up a sweat. I was confused. No, more than that, I was terrified.

"Look, Bull," Jack said calmly but forcefully, "we're all going to be late for school if Myra goes in to change."

"Yeah, Bull," Mikki agreed to my relief. Although she was dressed in a fashion Bull would approve of, she seemed to support me. "You know how Mrs. Miner is. She's just looking for an excuse to have the principal suspend you from sports for awhile. Being late might be the excuse she needs."

All of this seemed to soak slowly into Bull's thick skull. At last, he nodded. "Okay, I'll let you get by this once, but that's it, you understand?"

I said nothing, but that seemed to please Bull. He didn't require answers from females. Saying nothing to him probably passed as agreement in his slow mind. We drove wordlessly to school, but I was fuming. I had never felt so helpless in my life.

Ovid High was one of those sprawling, flat school buildings that sprung up from the fifties on. It looked as if Ovid supported its schools, for I doubted if the building was more than ten years old. It was a complex of wings, all built out of tan brick with a minimum of windows so that the students in the classrooms would not be distracted by the weather outside. Dozens of students were milling between the parking

lot and the school entrance, in spite of the cold temperatures and gray skies which threatened more snow. Bull parked his car, got out, slammed the door and headed for the building without a word to any of us. He was pissed; I was relieved. I was afraid he would want to lead me into the school his arm around me, just to let everyone know that I was his chick. What a disgusting thought!

Mikki came up and grabbed my arm tightly through the down jacket I was wearing. "Are you trying to piss him off?"

"I'm just trying not to piss me off," I told her. "What business is it of his what I wear to school?"

"Look," Jack said, grabbing my other arm, "we can all talk about this later. You and I have a Government class to get to."

Leaving Mikki behind and confused, Jack guided me into the school.

"You act like you know where you're going," I said.

"I think I do," he replied. "If you just sort of let your mind go, you seem to find or do what you need by instinct."

Ovid High was a fairly good-sized school. If I had to guess, I would say it probably had about twelve hundred students. Of course, it was also probably the only high school in Ovid. The student body consisted mostly of the transparent people. They seemed to be going about their business as if they were as real as I was. Occasionally, I would catch a glimpse of someone who was solid, but not often. It was an eerie feeling. I could tell Jack was disturbed by it, too.

Jack and I got to our Government class just as the bell was ringing. We took the two remaining seats in the back of the room and tried to look interested as the teacher, a transparent person by the name of 'Mr. Dewitt' according to the nameplate on his desk, launched immediately into a lecture on the relation of the Federal government to the state governments. It was dry material, and I had heard it before. Blessed with an excellent memory, I knew I would have little trouble with this class.

I used the lecture to spend a little time looking around the classroom. I

counted only four other 'real' people in the class. One, unfortunately, was Bull. He was sitting about half way toward the front, slumped back with body language that cried, 'I'm bored.' Jack, of course, was one of the real ones. The other two were a boy and a girl who sat a couple of rows forward and to my right. They both looked as if they belonged on the cover of a teen magazine. He had wavy brown hair and looked like a younger Brad Pitt. She was attractive enough to be a model, her auburn hair like something from a hair care commercial with its shine and body. They kept looking at each other with obvious affection. Both were dressed very preppy. The rest of the class was composed of kids who looked like normal high school teens, except for the hint of transparency.

We had a study hall next (no open campus nonsense in a small town like Ovid. If the kids weren't in class, they were to be in study hall). I used it as an opportunity to re-read *Romeo and Juliet*, which according to the assignment sheet in my locker was to be the play we were reading this week. Then, I used the rest of the period to do a last-minute review for the History test. The period passed quickly, and I became so absorbed in what I was doing that I didn't even think about who I had become.

English proved to be my first real challenge. For one thing, I was sure from the way some of the other girls whispered and giggled as I came in that Myra had become something of a joke in certain circles. I wasn't surprised. Myra may have been a bimbo, but she wasn't taking bimbo classes. She was taking a full load of courses that college-bound teens took. Also, I noticed the students surrounding me looked a bit brighter on the average than those in the Government class. That class was probably a required one. This class looked a bit more accelerated. They were expected to read fairly advanced material, I noticed from the outline. Shakespeare, Milton, and Chaucer were all on the agenda, and none of them were easy reads. The only two real students who had joined us in English were the two preppies. I wouldn't have been surprised to find out that their names were Biff and Buffy.

I wondered what had happened to Myra. She seemed to be, at the heart of things, an intelligent girl. Yet here she was, dating an anthropoid ape and dressing like Little Betty Bimbo. What had gone wrong?

The English teacher, Ms. Saunders from the nameplate, was an older woman, perhaps sixty, with a kindly face and a mature but not unattractive figure. Her hair was mostly gray, pulled back into a tight bun. She was dressed in an attractive blue dress of a modest length. And, she was not transparent. I wondered if everyone who was real in Ovid was like me, and if so, who she had been before. She was the oldest real person I had seen thus far. Even given her age, she was reasonably attractive. I suddenly realized that in many ways, Ovid was like a television show's version of a small town. It was populated by unusually attractive people.

"Today," Ms. Saunders began, "we have a special guest who will be joining us. Dr. Miner, our Superintendent of Schools will be here shortly. As some of you may know, her Master's degree is in English literature, and her thesis was on *Romeo and Juliet*. Ah, here she is now."

Dr. Miner was a very sophisticated woman in perhaps her early forties. Her hair was light brown and fashionably styled, and she wore an attractive dark green business suit. She was a real person, and maybe a bit more. She was, like the Judge, almost larger than life, and she carried herself with such poise and grace that the entire classroom was enraptured.

"I'm very pleased to be invited to your class today," she said, her warm smile returned by every student. "*Romeo and Juliet* is certainly one of my favorite of Shakespeare's plays. Ms. Saunders has promised me a reading of one of the scenes. Let's see, Jack Paris, would you read the part of Romeo for us?"

There were snickers from several girls as Jack stood. "Yes, ma'am." I realized this was the first time I had heard Jack's last name. I kind of liked it. It sounded... what? Romantic? Please.

“Myra Smithwick?”

“What?” Oops. My mind had been wandering.

“Myra,” Dr. Miner said calmly, “would you read the part of Juliet for us?”

“Oh, yes,” I said, standing. There was more snickering. Only this time, I felt as if the snickering was another way of saying, “The bimbo did it again.”

“All right,” Dr. Miner began. “I would like for the two of you to start with Act II, Scene II.”

Oh my god. It was the balcony scene. I looked at Jack as he began, “He jests at scars that never felt a wound. But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?”

Jack read marvelously well. There was almost a magical cadence to his delivery. His soliloquy was broken only by my words, “Ay me,” before continuing. As he finished, it was my turn. “O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?” I was amazed at the musical quality of my own voice. We were like two singers singing the perfect duet, back and forth, bringing life to Shakespeare’s prose.

It was as if we were no longer Jack and Myra, but actually Romeo and Juliet, showering each other with promises of undying love. I began to feel something stirring in my breasts and between my legs that I had never felt before. We didn’t even have to look often at the text. It was as if we knew it by heart. At last, when Romeo—Jack—finished the scene with, “Hence will I to my ghostly father’s cell, His help to crave and my dear hap to tell,” the room was quiet for several moments. Then, at the urgings of Dr. Miner, the room erupted in applause. Self consciously, Jack and I took our seats, nodding to the applause. But, I noticed we continued to look at each other.

Other students read, only to be rewarded with polite applause. Before we all knew it, the bell sounded, signifying our lunch break. On the way out, Dr. Miner stopped Jack and me. “You two did a terrific job of reading,” she said with a big smile. “I’m very proud of you both. Myra, I

hope this means we can begin to expect great things from you again.”

“I hope so,” I said, not sure exactly what she was driving at.

I had forgotten how bad high school cafeteria food could be.

Compared to Mom’s cooking, this was slops. But it filled the stomach.

Jack and I ate together, neither mentioning our morning reading. Just as we finished lunch, we were joined by the other two real students who had been in our English class. They were both bright and cheerful in a preppy sort of way.

The boy began the conversation. “Hi, Jack, Myra.”

We both mumbled “hi’s” since we were apparently supposed to know who they were.

“Myra,” the girl said, “I need to go to the girl’s room. Will you come with me?”

I know girls have a habit of going to the restroom in packs, but I suspected there was more to it this time. It was not so much a request to keep her company, but more of a command. I was curious, so I just replied, “Sure.” As we walked away, I noticed the boy had begun an intense conversation with Jack.

The girl’s room was deserted except for one transparent redhead who was just finishing her hair. She smiled at us and continued to brush. My companion looked somewhat uncomfortable as she made the motions of primping in the mirror. I emulated her actions until the redhead, with another smile, walked out.

“Okay,” the girl said. “Now, we can talk, but if someone else walks in, we’ll have to just be two girls fixing our faces, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed, confused but very curious.

The girl put out her slim hand. “First, hi, I’m Samantha Wallace. Just call me Sam. My boyfriend is Danny Mitchell. But in Ovid, you should know that, because we’ve all gone to school together since kindergarten. What you and I remember, though, is very different.”

“You know who I am—was—then?” I asked.

She shook her head. "I know what you were. I know that until yesterday, you were someone else. I don't know who you were, though, and you probably shouldn't tell me until you know me a lot better. We tend to keep our original identities private. It helps us to fit in here better."

"So what can you tell me?" I asked. "And why couldn't you tell me out there with your boyfriend? Can't he know any of this?"

"No," she explained. "He knows everything I'm going to tell you. The problem is there is a little corollary to the spell on all of us. If we remember who we were, we can only talk about the changes in twos. When all four of us were out there together, we couldn't be having this conversation. Danny is telling Jack roughly what I'm telling you, okay?"

I nodded.

"That's why we need to talk about something else if somebody walks in on us and..."

The door opened and two girls in black and gold cheerleader outfits walked in. One was blonde like me, but the other was dark, probably Indian. Oklahoma has a large Indian population. They greeted us, but both seemed a little surprised to see Sam and me together.

Apparently we ran in different circles. They primped at the mirror, causing Sam and I to do the same. Then Sam said softly to me, "I see you're trying for a more subdued look with your makeup. Let me give you a hand."

She opened my purse and pulled out my lipstick. Then, she handed me a tissue and suggested, "You should wipe off your lipstick first and we'll start over."

I did as she asked, then faced her as she carefully recovered my lips. I was actually becoming used to the odd taste and the slightly greasy feel. I would have preferred to wear none at all, but I knew that was out of the question. It would be so far out of character as to be suspicious. She finished just as the two cheerleaders left.

“There!” she said proudly. I looked at what she had done. It was a subtle difference, but it looked so much more... natural. I was actually pleased with the result.

“Can you do something with the rest?” I asked. “I mean, the eyes are a bit much still, don’t you think?”

“Yes I do,” she agreed, “but let’s go on with our discussion first. When we get interrupted, I can work on your face.”

“Okay.”

Sam sighed and began a recitation I was sure she had given before. “As nearly as we can tell, Ovid was created about a year and a half ago by the Judge and some... others. Its population was made up almost entirely of the semi-transparent people I’m sure you’ve noticed. Then, slowly but surely, he’s repopulating the town with people like us who had other lives before. Most of the people he changes never remember their old lives, but about one in four or five remembers. We haven’t figured out why some remember and some don’t, or why this was done to us, but it just is.”

“Who is the Judge?” I asked.

She closed her eyes. “That is perhaps the biggest taboo here. We can’t talk about that, even when there are just two of us. You’ll probably figure it out eventually. Most people do, I’m sure.”

The restroom door opened again, and three girls, each giggling about something a teacher had said in some class, fixed their makeup as Sam worked on my eyes. I was beginning to wonder if girls ever actually used the toilets in the girl’s room. All I had seen thus far was a procession of girls in front of the mirror. If I were an architect, I think I would decrease the number of toilets in high school girl’s rooms and double the square footage of mirrors. At last they left. I was actually glad they had come in, for Sam had worked her magic on my eyes. All trace of bimbo was gone from my face.

“Okay,” I asked when they were gone, “is there any way to get back to my real life?”

"I don't think so," she replied. "At least, I'm not aware of anyone who has managed it. Once the Judge has decided, that's who you are." She hesitated for a moment before asking, "I don't mean to pry, but was your old life that good? I mean, life here is really pretty pleasant."

I thought about that. In my real life, I had no close family. I also had no future and a stack of regrets. Every morning, I got up to go to a nowhere job and every evening, I came home (if you could call the dump I lived in 'home') filthy with a sore back and calluses on top of calluses. No, my old life wasn't a very good one, but I was a man. And as a man, I could... What could I do? Well, as a man I could... be a man.

"I suppose you're right," I allowed, "but in my real life I was... I mean, I wasn't..."

"You weren't a girl?" she prompted.

"Is it that obvious?" I asked, embarrassed.

She shook her head. "No, except for the thing about not knowing some of the finer points of makeup, you're doing pretty well. When you read the part of Juliet this morning, I practically cried. If you were just playing the part of a girl with no real feelings behind it, they should give you an Academy Award."

"I've just always liked Shakespeare," I protested. "I could have probably read Romeo as well."

"You may think that, but I doubt it. Try it at home some time. I think you'll be surprised. Now, as far as trying to learn to be a girl, I can help you. After you've been here for a couple of months, you'll wonder why being male was ever important to you."

I couldn't imagine that, but I had a gut feeling Sam was speaking from experience. It was almost impossible to imagine this model-perfect girl as a man. Every movement, every word, spoke of confident femininity, and when she looked at Danny, it was with the look of a woman gazing at the man she adored. No, I thought, dismissing my suspicion. There was no way Sam could ever have been a man.

We rejoined Jack and Danny, who had obviously had a long talk about Ovid. "Danny has asked us to join them at his house tonight," Jack mentioned nonchalantly.

"I've got a dinner to go to with my parents," I explained. "It's a prenuptial dinner, so I don't know what time it will be over."

"Neither do I," Danny said, "but my parents are going to be there, too. Dad is one of the groomsmen, so you can just ride home with them."

"No bachelor party for the groom?" I asked.

Danny shook his head. "It wouldn't be very exciting. The groom doesn't drink and wouldn't look at any other woman than his bride-to-be. Not that I blame him, because Susan Henderson is a pretty nice looking woman, even with the glasses. Where's the fun in a bachelor party?"

I smiled a genuine smile. "Okay, sure. I'd like to come over."

"I'll meet you at Danny's," Jack said.

A sudden black thought crossed my mind. "Wait a minute," I said. "What about Bull?"

"He's not invited," Danny replied darkly.

"That's not what I meant," I explained. "I mean, he seems to think he owns me, and I'm a little... well, concerned."

"Frightened?" Jack clarified.

"Well, yes."

Jack shifted in his chair to come to his full height. "Look, don't worry about Bull. First of all, he's got a wrestling meet tonight. Mikki told me since she's going to it with some friends. I begged off. Also, if Bull gives you any trouble, well, let's just say he'd better not."

I felt suddenly better than I had felt since my transformation. "Okay, let's do it!"

Jack smiled at me. "Then we had better head for History class. I believe we all have a test to take."

I had worried about the test, but I shouldn't have bothered. In a word, it was a breeze. Most of the test was multiple choice. For example:

'The President of the Confederacy was:

a) Andrew Johnson b) Robert E. Lee c) Jefferson Davis d) None of the Above.'

Please.

I didn't remember history being that easy when I was in high school as a male. Maybe it was, and maybe I just wasn't paying attention. I'll admit, I developed an interest in history after I dropped out of school, but this was so simple, I wondered why I had even bothered to study.

The history teacher, Ms. Samson, seemed bewildered when she saw that I was the first student finished. "Ms. Smithwick," she admonished me, "if you are finished with your test, perhaps you should spend some time reviewing your answers."

"Yes, ma'am," I replied. "I've already done that."

There were snickers around the room. Obviously, my reading of Shakespeare had been a fluke. The bimbo had made random guesses on her history test and was now ready for an exciting day at the mall (assuming Ovid was even big enough to have a mall, which I doubted). The surprise will be on you guys, I thought. I aced that test and I knew it.

Even Jack looked a little surprised. He was still working on the test. I could foresee that I would have to help him with History, in return for his help in Algebra and Chemistry. We would probably be spending a lot of time studying together. I found that an oddly pleasant prospect.

By the end of the school day, I was quite proud of myself. I had acquitted myself well, I thought. Even Chemistry and Algebra didn't seem too hard. I was amazed how much I learned when I paid attention. Of course, I was really over a decade older than the other students. I was more like the college dropout who did well in school after spending a few years working or in the military. I knew what awaited the uneducated, and I didn't think this female body would do

very well at digging ditches.

“Are you going to the wrestling meet?” Mikki asked me as she caught up with me at my locker.

I tried to look disappointed, but I probably failed. “Can’t. I have to go to that prenuptial dinner with my parents.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Mikki said. She didn’t sound all that disappointed either. I think Mikki was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable around me. “Well, I’m going. I’ll root for Bull for you.”

“You do that.”

I managed to figure out which bus to get on and slid into my seat. It was only a minute or so before Jack slid in next to me. I was a little ashamed of myself, but I felt a momentary shiver of pleasure as he scooted against me on the narrow seat. “Want to drop by for a few minutes?” I asked him.

He studied me for a moment. “I thought you had a dinner to go to.”

“I do,” I agreed, “but I’m sure I have time. I wanted to hear what you learned from Danny.” That was partially true. I also just wanted to have Jack around to talk to. We were both strangers in a strange land, and without him, I wasn’t sure I could hold my masquerade together.

“Okay.”

Mom and Dad (it was odd how quickly I had come to think of them more as my mother and father than I did my real ones) hadn’t made it home yet, so Jack and I settled in at the kitchen table, glasses of milk in front of us, looking for all the world like something out of a sixties sitcom on Nickelodeon. I told him what Sam had told me. Then, he told me of his conversation with Danny.

“He told me about the same thing Sam told you,” he replied. “He told me the transparent people are called ‘shades.’ He doesn’t know where they come from. They look like people and act like people. They’re completely solid, too. Then, whenever the Judge decides to transform someone into an Ovid resident, the shade representing them disappears.”

“So there were shades for all of us,” I concluded.

Jack shook his head. “No, not for all of us. There was a shade for you before, and one for Bull. Mikki and I apparently didn’t exist before yesterday. The real people know that, although Danny said that slowly but surely, they’ll develop false memories of knowing us for a long time. The shades accept us as if we had always been here.”

“So even memories are in a constant state of flux,” I said slowly.

“Constant,” Jack agreed. “Get this. Ovid High plays other schools in sports, right?”

“I guess so.”

“But the shades can’t leave town, and if people from outside came to Ovid, they would notice something was wrong with the shades. Danny says that what happens is that all the other schools always play Ovid in Ovid. Their teams and fans come here, enjoy the game, never notice anything wrong, then go home and when they leave, they forget that they were ever here. The out of town papers don’t report the game, and everybody outside Ovid assumes their team had a bye the night they actually played Ovid.”

“Does he know how all this is being done?” I asked. “This would be quite a juggling act even for Q on Star Trek.”

Jack shrugged. “Obviously, it’s magic. Danny knows who the Judge really is, but apparently, he can’t tell us. And apparently, the Judge isn’t alone in this. We have to figure it all out for ourselves.”

I heard a car pull up in front. “It’s Mom,” I said, looking out the window. “You’d better go now. I’ll see you at Danny’s house later.”

“Okay,” he said, grabbing his books. Then, he did something I would never have expected. He gave me a chaste, brotherly kiss on the cheek as he left. I was too surprised to respond. I was even more surprised to realize I enjoyed it.

Mom helped me get ready. I didn’t have the foggiest notion what to wear. It’s a good thing I asked. I assumed since the dinner had to do with the wedding that it would be fairly formal. I was wrong. It was

‘nice casual’ as Mom put it. I ended up back in a skirt and heels, but nothing extreme this time. I wore a black sweater, a red plaid skirt which fit snugly but not too tightly, black tights, and black patent leather slip-ons with just a hint of a heel. I had replaced the hoop earrings with small, subtle studs and finished the outfit off with a gold bracelet and matching necklace. Along with the makeup treatment Sam had helped me with, I had a real ‘girl next door’ look. I kind of liked it.

Mom did, too. She came up and hugged me while dad was getting ready. “Sweetheart,” she said softly, “I’m so glad you’ve decided on a new look. It’s absolutely darling. I think this Jack is a good influence on you.”

“What?”

She looked a little flustered. “I didn’t mean to assume anything. It’s just that I saw Jack leaving this afternoon, and the two of you seemed to get along so well last night.”

“But we’re just friends,” I protested.

“I know you are,” she agreed, still flustered. “But it’s just that Bull seemed so... well, wrong for you, and this Jack is such a nice boy. Is he taking you to the dance?”

What dance? “I don’t know,” I said honestly.

That seemed to slow her down. “Well, I just assumed...”

Dad got her off the hook by calling out, “Where’s my green tie?” She rushed to help him, grateful for the interruption.

What dance? No one had said anything about a dance. I would have to ask Sam later.

The rehearsal went fine. Susan’s fiancé, Steven, was a nice guy, and I had to admit with chagrin, very nice looking. I had never noticed a man’s looks before, but I found I was now starting to notice. I wasn’t exactly interested in them; I just noticed. I knew that would start to happen more and more to me as the female hormones kept pumping through my body. It was a little hard to accept, though. I would have to

get used to it sometime.

The bridesmaids, including my mother, seemed to be having a wonderful time. In addition to Mom, the blonde I had seen in the courtroom was a bridesmaid, and the third was an absolutely striking redhead I had never seen before. For all her laughter and friendliness with the other two women, I couldn't help but think that she had the same bearing and larger-than-life demeanor of the Judge as Dr. Miner. I wondered if they were all some sort of superhumans or... A thought struck me. I began to have an idea about the identity of the powers that were in Ovid. I would have to check later.

"And how are you doing, Myra?" a woman's voice asked. I turned to see Susan Henderson, the bride. She looked somehow different than she had looked in the courtroom. She seemed more feminine and very much at ease.

"I'm doing okay, I guess, Ms. Henderson," I answered.

She smiled. "Just call me Susan. I'm not that much older than you are now, and I'm younger than you were a couple of days ago."

I looked around and saw that we were alone, so it was possible to talk about my transformation. "I guess so," I agreed.

"Your mother and I have gotten to be pretty good friends in the office. She's had a lot of trouble with you until the last couple of days. She thinks you've made a dramatic change in your life. Of course, she has no idea how dramatic that change really is," Susan laughed. "In any case, I'm proud of you, Myra. You seem to be adapting well. Certainly better than... well, let's just say better than some others I know."

I sighed, "I didn't figure I had much choice. I got a feeling the Judge doesn't change people back, does he?"

She shook her head. "I don't know of anyone he has ever changed back." Did I detect a note of irony in her voice?

"I know you can't tell me who the Judge is," I began.

"That's right."

“But can you at least tell me why he did this to me? I mean, Bear was a drug dealer and a bully, but here he is in Ovid, a great athlete with a bright future. And Jack and I were friends. Why did he get to stay male while I got to be a bimbo?”

“I notice you didn’t mention Mikki,” Susan observed.

“No, but at least Mack had to become female. Besides, he doesn’t remember any of his old life.”

“Does this mean you consider becoming a girl punishment?”

I was on shaky ground. Every real person in Ovid, as I understood it, had been someone else before they came to Ovid. I was sure Mikki and I weren’t the only sex changes. If Susan was born female, she might be insulted if I told her I thought becoming female was really a punishment. But wasn’t it? As a guy, I had strength. I could be ready to go anywhere in fifteen minutes. I was master of my own destiny. I was in charge. I lost all of those things when I became female. Here I was, a weak girl. I had only a small fraction of the strength I had enjoyed while male. Getting ready in fifteen minutes? I would be hard pressed just to get my makeup on in fifteen minutes. Was I in charge as a female? Not really. I couldn’t even tell Bull to get lost. I was genuinely frightened of him. I could never remember being truly frightened of another man in my entire life. And I didn’t even want to think about the clothes I had to wear.

On the other hand, I realized it was a potential second chance. I had dropped out of high school my Junior year, yet here I was back in my Junior year again. I was sure I could make something of my life this time around. Wasn’t that more important than having something dangling between my legs? I was beginning to think it was. Yet, I couldn’t overcome the nagging feeling that I could have utilized a second chance just as well in a male body.

“Well, Myra, do you consider it a punishment?”

“I’m not sure,” I replied honestly. “I know I would rather be male.”

She nodded. “I think that’s pretty natural at this stage. To answer your

question, though, the Judge seems to have his own criteria for deciding who gets to be male and who gets to be female. All I know is that I argued with him in chambers that you and your friend were both innocent bystanders.”

“Then why didn’t he let us go?”

“That I know and can tell you. To be honest, Myra, did you know Mack and Bear were dealing drugs?”

“We knew somebody was,” I allowed.

“No,” she said, glaring at me. “That isn’t what I asked. Be honest, now, you and Jack—or rather Brad at the time—knew they were dealing drugs.”

“Okay,” I sighed. “So I knew. We both knew. It really wasn’t any of our business.”

“Things as serious as drugs are everybody’s business,” she argued.

“The Judge won’t even allow them in Ovid. I have the feeling that he bought my arguments about you two. I think he was lenient with both of you.”

“Maybe,” I replied, “but I still feel like the guy in that old joke who gets sentenced to three hundred years in jail and sighs in relief because it could have been life.”

Susan laughed a musical laugh. “I know, it does seem that way sometimes.”

“Susan,” I asked slowly, “I know it’s frowned upon, but I have to ask. Who were you before you came to Ovid?”

She grinned. “I was a lawyer.”

It wasn’t the answer I was looking for, but it would have to do.

Susan moved on to talk with the rest of the party and tie up the details with Reverend Pickering, a real person who was the minister of First Baptist where the wedding would be held. Then, I rejoined my parents and we drove off for the dinner.

It was a nice dinner, held at a local steak house called Winston's out on the edge of town. I introduced myself to the two shades who were Danny's parents, then sat with my parents and enjoyed the meal. I didn't have to talk much. At sixteen, I was considered little more than a child, and except for polite small talk, I was excluded from most of the conversation. I was also excluded from the wine. It looked good, and I would have loved a glass with my meal, but I realized I was too young. It would have been out of character for me even to ask.

I noticed, though, that when I did respond to the question, my answer was the answer of a sixteen-year-old girl. It wasn't the magic, I was certain. Instead, I was actually beginning to think like a sixteen-year-old girl. When someone asked me what I wanted to do after school, I answered that I didn't know. When they asked me how I liked school, I gave the standard "fine" any young girl might give. When someone asked me if I had a boyfriend, I said, "Not really," but an image of Jack came up in my mind, unbidden.

About eight, the Mitchells collected me and I was off for an evening with Jack and our new friends.

I was afraid I would be seriously overdressed for the evening, and I was. Everyone else was in jeans, although Sam's were certainly feminine in appearance and did nothing to hide her sensational body. Danny and Jack were in the den when I came in while Sam was in the kitchen fixing soft drinks for everyone. Danny and Jack waved and Sam motioned me into the kitchen. When Danny's parents headed off to their room, saying something about "letting the kids have some privacy," Sam said, "Danny and Jack are discussing Ovid in a little more detail. We can join them in a few minutes and watch a movie. Danny and I thought we'd give you a chance to ask any other questions you might have thought about."

This was an awkward way to discuss matters. Why didn't the Judge allow us to discuss Ovid together instead of only in pairs? Did he fear a revolt? How could he be afraid of any of us when he had the power to transform us? "One question comes to mind," I replied. "Why is this being done to us?"

Sam smiled, "Why not?"

"That isn't an answer," I said petulantly.

"No," Sam agreed, "but it's probably the only answer you'll get. Everybody asks the question, but nobody seems to ever come up with the answer. Or if they have, they haven't been able to pass it on to the rest of us. After a little while, most of us just give up on that question and get on with our new lives."

"That's probably a lot easier for you than it will be for me," I pointed out.

"Why?" Sam asked, handing me a Coke. "Because you used to be a guy and I've always been a girl?"

"Well, yes."

"Fooled you!" she laughed. "After you've been here for a few weeks, you tend to take on all the characteristics of the person you've become. I've been here over a year now, but when I got here, I was as male as you were. In fact, I was a football player. Danny and I both played for Northwest Missouri State. Our plane was forced down here and the whole team was transformed into boys and girls of every shape and color. Even the coach was transformed. He's our History teacher now."

"Ms. Samson?" I gasped. It was hard to think of her as a football coach.

"That's right."

I mulled all of this over. "But why all the sex changes?" I asked.

"I can't help you there either, but if you think about it, a lot more males travel alone than females, especially on back highways like the ones that run through Ovid. Women take the Interstates and stop and ask for directions. Men like taking back roads and never stop to ask where they are. I guess that makes men more susceptible to finding Ovid. And since the town needs both men and women, a lot more men become women than the other way around."

“Okay,” I said, sipping my Coke. “I can buy that. But tell me what you can about me. Have we always been friends?”

“We used to be,” Sam replied uncomfortably.

“Look, Sam,” I explained, “I’m not the same Myra you knew before. You understand that. Right now, you know more about my past as Myra than I do. If I’m going to get through this, I need your help. So what’s the deal?”

Sam sighed, “The deal is that you and I go back to elementary school together. If you think about it, we don’t live very far apart, and there are only three elementary schools in Ovid, so it stands to reason that we’ve known each other most of our lives. You were my best friend until last summer.”

“What happened then?”

“Bull happened,” she replied. “You were drawn to him for some reason. He was everything you weren’t. He was big and strong and depended more on his brawn than his brains. Over the summer, you changed from being a real girl next-door type to a... a bimbo. By the time school started, it was if I didn’t even know you. You went from being an A student to one of the ones just getting by. We just didn’t have anything in common anymore.”

“And now?” I prompted.

“I don’t know,” she replied honestly. “You seem more like the Myra I remembered. And now, we have a lot more in common, since neither one of us were even girls before Ovid. What do you think of Bull?”

I told her who Bull and Mikki had been before. When she had digested this, she said, “I can understand why you would be repulsed by both of them, but be careful, Myra. Mikki isn’t Mack and Bull isn’t Bear. They’ve forgotten who they were. They won’t be drug dealers here. In case you didn’t know, there are no drugs in Ovid. They aren’t allowed by the Judge, and Officer Mercer is everywhere.”

“They may not be the same people,” I argued, “but I at least remember who they were.”

“I hope so,” Sam replied. “It’s been my experience that even though they aren’t the same people, good people stay good people and bad people... well, let’s just say they usually don’t make good people. I’m glad you’re wary of Bull. Does that mean you’re going with Jack to the Christmas party?”

“What Christmas party?”

Sam explained, “The school has one every year. It’s not exactly politically correct, I know, mixing church and state and all that, but the rules are different in Ovid. I had expected you to be going with Bull, but maybe you and Jack should go.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’ll have to check with Jack.”

“If he is, we can double,” Sam suggested.

“I’d like that,” I admitted. I paused for a moment. There was one more thing I wanted to ask, but how to ask it? I would just have to blurt it out. “Sam?”

“Yes, Myra?”

“When did you, you know, become interested in boys?”

Sam leaned against the counter and looked up at the ceiling in thought. “That’s a tough question. It happened over time. When I first became a girl, I was in too much of a shock to be interested in either sex. Danny and I had been good friends in college. We just started talking, trying to help each other through the changes. The next thing we both knew, we were... well, you know. It just started to seem natural to us.”

“Is that what might happen to Jack and me?”

“It might,” she agreed. “You’ve got all the right equipment now. Since you’re going to be a girl for the rest of your life, it wouldn’t hurt to find the right guy.”

“Sam?”

“Yes, Myra?”

I gave her a quick hug. "Thanks for your help."

"Any time," she said, smiling, as she picked up a drink for Danny and headed for the den. I got Jack's drink and followed.

We ended up watching *Beauty and the Beast*. It was a compromise. Danny had wanted to watch an action film (he didn't really care which one) and Jack and I abstained. Sam had her heart set on a romantic comedy. "For about the last year, her taste has gone from action movies to romantic comedies," Danny said cryptically. It was about as close as he could come to talking about Sam's change into a girl in a larger group.

I wondered if the same thing would happen to me. I was pretty much a fan of action films as well. I had never been much of a fan of romances. I had to admit, though, that I enjoyed the film. I found myself sympathizing with poor Belle. First, there was the clod in her hometown who was determined to have her. Then there was the Beast. Of course, the Beast turns out to be her true love while the handsome guy from her hometown turns out to be the baddie. The film actually made me think. What was Bull? Was he the baddie from my hometown, or was he the Beast? It would be best to just stay away from him rather than try to find out. I admit, I was frightened of him and what he might do when I tried to stay away, but try I must.

It was all in all an enjoyable evening. Sam and Danny snuggled up together on the floor, leaving the couch to Jack and I. A few minutes into the film, I noticed Jack's arm draped casually on the couch behind me. At first, it caused me to tense up and lean forward, but as I got into the movie, I began to lean back in a more comfortable position. I don't know when it actually happened, but by the time Belle had reached the Beast's castle, Jack's arm was resting around my shoulders, and by the time the movie ended, I was actually leaning against him and thinking about what a happy ending the film had. Wistfully, I began to wonder if my own life would be as happy.

The movie over, Jack and I said our good nights. Jack had brought his

parent's car, so he offered to drive me home. I happily accepted, and the two of us walked arm in arm out into the chilly Oklahoma night. In the car, I found myself sitting close to Jack.

As we were driving to my house, I asked Jack, "Did Danny tell you anything about a Christmas party at school?"

"No, he didn't, but Mikki did."

"Mikki?" I repeated cautiously, moving a little further away from Jack.

He nodded. "I'm taking her to the party."

"Oh." The disappointment in my voice was obvious. I didn't mean for it to be, but there it was.

Jack looked at me, stopping the car in front of my house. "Look, I didn't ask her. I mean, Jack did, but I wasn't Jack then. I'd really rather not take her. I'd rather take you."

Why did my heart suddenly jump. "Oh?" There was no disappointment in my voice that time.

"Yes, but you're going with Bull anyway."

But I didn't want to go with Bull. I wanted to go with... with... well, anybody else. I mean, it would have been better with Jack, or... Oh, hell, I didn't know what I meant.

To break the silence, Jack suggested, "Look, maybe we can all go together."

"Maybe," I said without conviction as I opened the door. Jack moved toward me, then thought better of it and moved back under the wheel.

"Good night," I said softly, feeling my voice catch. I closed the door before I heard his reply.

As soon as I had closed the front door behind me, I began to feel unwelcome tears welling up. With effort, I choked them back down and jumped as I heard my mother's voice from the living room saying, "Myra, are you all right?"

"What?" I said, startled as she turned up the lights. "Oh, yes, I'm fine,"

I managed to lie. "It was just a sad movie."

"Oh," she responded, not really believing it, I knew. "I stayed up because your friend Mikki called. She said for you to call her at this number. It was something about Bull being hurt." There didn't seem to be much sympathy in my mother's voice. I knew she didn't like Bull one bit. "She said to call before eleven."

"What time is it now?"

"Ten thirty," she replied.

Bull hurt? Did I care? Maybe my change of sex had given me a more tender heart, but I really didn't want him hurt. I just wanted him to leave me alone. I called Mikki.

"Oh, Myra, thank god you called," Mikki said breathlessly. "Bull got hurt in a wrestling match this evening."

"What happened?" I asked, trying to sound concerned.

"He was pinned funny," she told me. "It twisted his leg back and stretched the ligaments in his knee."

Good. At least it wasn't life threatening.

"He's going to be fine," she went on. "They were concerned about how it might affect his football chances when I called you, but the doctor has checked him out and he's going to be fine. They're going to keep him over night and put him on crutches for a couple of days. Then, they say with a couple of weeks of therapy, he'll be fine. Isn't that good news?"

"Yes, very."

"He wants to see you," she said. "Of course, it's too late tonight. Where were you anyway?"

"At Sam's," I replied without elaborating.

"Oh. Well, visiting hours start at nine tomorrow."

"Okay," I agreed. "What hospital is he in?"

"What hospital?" she laughed. "What do you think? There's only one."

Whoops! “Sure. I’ll be there in the morning.”

As I hung up the phone, I quickly forgot about Bull and began to think about Jack again. What was wrong with me anyway? I wondered as I got ready for bed. Jack had been my best friend, Brad, and he hadn’t changed that much when he became Jack. Why was I mooning over him like some lovesick teenage girl? Oh, shit, I was a teenage girl. Was I lovesick, too?

I suddenly looked down at myself and realized that while I was thinking about Jack, I had managed to get ready for bed again. I was wearing the same yellow nightgown I had worn the night before. I looked at myself carefully in the mirror while wearing the nightgown. I looked like a typical teenage girl. No trace of Marty was there anymore. Why should I fool myself?

I touched a breast and tried to imagine what it would feel like to be wearing something like this nightgown while a boy like Jack touched my breast. I was a little surprised to feel my nipples pushing outward against the soft material. There was a warmth in my groin as well that signalled an empty feeling there. It was almost a yearning. I pulled my hand away from my breast at once. Yes, I was most assuredly a teenage girl.

I felt a tear squeeze from my eye unbidden and trickle down my cheek as I crawled into bed. I was so confused. Why couldn’t I be like some of the others in Ovid who had no idea who they had been before? That would make life so much simpler, I thought, as I drifted off to sleep.

Mom woke me again the next morning. “I’ve got to get over to Susan’s,” she told me as I was still waking up. “The wedding is at two. Tell your father to get there by one thirty. He’s at the office this morning and he’s supposed to go directly to the church. You need to get ready and—oh, how are you going to get there?”

I suddenly realized she had planned to leave me without a car. “Mom, I have to visit Bull this morning. I promised.” Did I really sound that whiney?

She started to say something, then stopped. After thinking for a moment, she commented, "I didn't think you were seeing Bull anymore."

"I'm not," I said. "At least I don't think I am, but he's hurt, and I promised Mikki I would visit him."

"All right. You can take my car. I'll get a ride with Cindy. But don't be late! I want you there at one thirty, too."

"I will be," I assured her as she gave me a quick peck on the cheek and rushed for the phone, probably to call Cindy, whoever that was. "Oh, Mom, what should I wear?"

"The maroon dress would be nice," she called up from the kitchen.

Maroon. Hmmm. I looked in the closet and found it with little trouble. It appeared to be velvet with long sleeves. She was right. It would look good on me. Let's see, dark tan hose and hopefully I had matching shoes. Maybe a gold necklace, and... What the hell was wrong with me? I was acting like this was the important decision of the day. It was as if the thoughts invaded my mind whenever I let my guard down. I sighed. I might as well give into them. At this rate, within a month, I'd be as feminine as if I had been Myra all my life. I just had to have that life in order when that time came.

To see Bull, I slipped on a pink sweat suit and tied my hair in a long ponytail. I didn't want to look too sexy for him. He'd have to take me as I was if he wanted a visit from me. Finding the hospital was easy. There was a map of Ovid in the phone book, and all I had to do is drive Mom's little Ford Tempo close enough to the hospital that I could follow the signs.

Bull was on the third floor, which was the top floor. He had a semi-private room, but had no roommate when I got there. He was sitting up, his knee in a brace, watching Saturday morning cartoons. He didn't look especially threatening, and as I entered the room, I tried to remind myself that he had no idea he had ever been anyone but Bull. He turned and smiled when he saw me.

“Hey, Myra,” he said cheerfully. “I’m glad you came.”

“How are you feeling?” I asked tentatively.

He shrugged. “Pretty good. I get to go home tomorrow. The doctor said there’s no real damage. I’ll just have to take it easy for a week or so.”

“I’m glad you’re okay,” I said. Then, I just couldn’t think of anything else to say as I stood by his bed. After all, I really didn’t know him. And what I had seen of him the last couple of days, I hadn’t liked.

At last, he broke the ice. “Listen, Myra, I’m sorry for the way I’ve acted with you. I guess I was just nervous about the meet.”

I didn’t say anything, but he was saying all the right things.

He continued, “I just love you so much.”

Love?

“I won’t do it again, okay?”

I had to answer that. “Okay,” I agreed.

He smiled. “That’s great. Then I’ll pick you up Monday for school, okay?”

There was that ‘okay’ thing again. “Okay.”

“And I’m gonna get you the nicest corsage for the dance Friday. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, returning his smile, realizing that I had just confirmed our date for the Christmas dance. I didn’t want to go with him. I didn’t want to go with anybody. But what was I to do? Besides, if he was good on his word, he would be a perfect gentleman. And I had to get used to socializing in this body anyhow. “Uh, look, I’ve got to go,” I told him. “I’ve got a wedding to go to.”

“Okay,” he said calmly. “How about a little get well kiss?”

I hesitated for a moment, then bent over and gave him a sisterly kiss on the cheek. It seemed to be all he had expected, for he smiled at me and said, “Have a good time at the wedding.”

I got to the church at exactly the same time as my father, right at one thirty. I was afraid that I was going to be late, but I found I was getting better at dressing as a girl. Sam's makeup lessons had come in handy, and I found that I had all the accessories I needed for the maroon dress.

"You look great, Myra," my dad said to me, giving me a hug as I stepped out of the car.

"Thanks, dad," I replied. I didn't actually feel great, though. This was the third time I had worn a skirt, but it was the first time I had worn something so formal and at the same time, well, sexy. As we walked to the church, I could feel every male eye turning in my direction. Now I knew how the Iraqi fighters must have felt during the Gulf War with every allied radar in the area zeroing in on them.

This was only the second time I had worn a really high heel. I was happy to see that whatever force had transformed me had given me the balance I needed to maneuver on them, although I did feel a little unstable. At least it had turned out to be a beautiful sunny day with a temperature in the forties, so the ice which might have been on the sidewalks the day before had substantially melted. I still had visions of how embarrassing it would be if I slipped while wearing these heels and landed on my cute little butt.

The service was beautiful. It was a word I would probably not have used in my old male body, but it was beautiful. All of the bridesmaids, my mother included, were gorgeous in their dark green dresses. My mother's brown hair contrasted well with the blonde and redhead who stood beside her. Danny's father looked resplendent in his dark tuxedo as did the other groomsmen. Uncomfortably, I found myself looking at the bridesmaids more to see how they did their hair or makeup. The groomsmen, I was beginning to look at as if trying to decide who was the best looking. Actually, the groom beat all of them.

Fortunately, these thoughts were interrupted by the grand music announcing the entry of the bride. Susan was incredible. For once, she had forsaken her glasses, and her long hair had been gently curled, to frame an absolutely perfect face. The look of joy and

contentment she exhibited were breathtaking. She wore a long white gown which molded itself perfectly against the curves of her body. Her hand was curved gently around the arm of a proud-looking shade who was apparently her father.

I heard sniffles from some of the women around me. 'Why do so many women always cry at weddings?' I wondered, trying to ignore the moisture forming at the corners of my own eyes. I hoped no one noticed the little snuffle I made.

The reception was held in the community room of the church. I hung around with my parents, since I really didn't know anyone there until I spotted Danny. I made my way over to him and was rewarded with one of his bright smiles. "Sam's not here?" I asked.

"Nope. I don't think her folks even know the bride or groom. I notice Jack and his parents aren't here either."

"No," I replied. "I wouldn't know them if I saw them. I haven't met them. Jack has always been a very private person, even... well, even before our changes."

"I know," Danny observed. "I think there's something in his past that's made him this way, and even the transformation wasn't enough to change that. It's lucky that if one of you had to become a girl, it was you and not him."

I flushed at that. Was he accusing me of being effeminate or gay? I wasn't either, and how could he make that assumption anyway? He hadn't known me before. He saw the anger in my eyes and quickly said, "Look, Myra, don't misunderstand me. I didn't mean what you thought I meant. I'm part of the largest transformation the Judge has ever made. It took him three days to change us all, so we must have exhausted even his powers. I was part of a planeload of macho football players and their coaches on their way to a game. About half of us became girls of all ages, shapes and descriptions. Of the thirty guys who became female, six remembered who they were before. Five of them adjusted pretty well, but the sixth, well, she was a lot like Jack. She was a very private person, and now she's got a lot of

psychological problems. That's all I meant."

I wondered who that person was. I didn't ask, though. I was beginning to understand the etiquette of Ovid. If someone was transformed and lost all memory of their previous life, it was all right to talk about the change, but if someone was still aware of who they had been before, it wasn't polite. It was a strange convention, but Ovid was a strange town.

Others drifted too close to our conversation, so we were forced to talk about more mundane things. As our respective parents found us, we went with them into the buffet line. I didn't see Danny after that. My parents accepted an invitation from some friends to go out to the Ovid Country Club for a couple of drinks. Since I had Mom's car, I told them I would be fine and walked in the house, exhausted, at a little after eight. The phone was ringing as I walked into the kitchen. It was Jack.

"You sound tired," he observed as I answered the phone.

"I am," I said truthfully.

He was silent for a moment, before asking, "Look, are you mad at me?"

"I'm not mad," I answered tersely. But I was. Was it because he was taking Mikki to the dance? Why else would I be mad? It was stupid of me, I knew, but there it was.

"You sound mad."

"I'm not!"

He sighed. "Okay, let me start over. I know you're disappointed that I'm taking Mikki to the dance, and..."

"I'm not disappointed," I lied. I'm surprised my nose didn't grow.

"Hear me out. I've decided to tell her I can't take her. I'd rather be with you."

My heart was suddenly beating faster, and I got one of those warm flashes in my crotch. This shouldn't have been important to me. I was physically a girl, but mentally, I wasn't, at least not entirely. All right, I

realized I had a steady stream of female hormones running through my system. I also knew that men and women were wired differently. Every hour of every day, I was becoming more and more mentally the girl the Judge had made of me physically. I could accept that. What I was having trouble accepting was the obvious growing attachment I had to Jack. Someone once said lovers should be best friends first. Jack, or rather Brad, and I had been best friends. It just seemed so unnatural for this to be happening so quickly.

“Are you still there?” he asked, worried.

“I’m here. Look, Jack, I don’t want you to let Mikki down. It’s not fair to her.” What was I saying?

“But she’s really Mack,” he argued.

I responded, “No she isn’t, at least not in any way that counts. Maybe deep down there’s something of Mack left, but it’s not there where you or I can see it. I saw Bull today. He was very nice to me, and I don’t want to let him down, either. Let’s not make any changes right now. After the dance Friday, we can see how we both feel and go from there.”

“All right,” he agreed reluctantly. Then, after a pause, “Do you want to get together tonight?”

“Jack, I would,” I replied, “but I really am tired. This being a girl is hard work. I’m going to take a bath, put on a warm robe, and read until I fall asleep.”

“Okay,” he said, obviously disappointed. “Say, how about church?”

Church? I didn’t even know he went to church. He didn’t seem the type.

“Well... okay.”

“Great! I’ll see you at nine thirty. Church is at ten. Good night.”

That sly dog. He had already looked up church times. Well, maybe I could use a little religion, too. It was ironic, though, I thought as I started getting ready for bed, Sunday would make the fourth day in a

row that I had needed to wear a skirt. I vowed that I was going to wear nothing but jeans on Monday even if I was invited to a White House dinner.

I had surprised myself by not accepting Jack's invitation to the dance. Obviously, I would have rather gone with him. It was just that Bull seemed to be trying to improve his behavior toward me, and I was concerned at what might happen if I broke our date. Concerned? Yes, and a little frightened, too. I had seen two sides of Bull. I didn't want to do anything which might bring the bad side back.

Sunday morning, I got up cheerful and well rested. It was another beautiful day, and I was actually looking forward to going out with Jack. It would really be the first time we went out by ourselves. I wasn't sure where I wanted our relationship to go, but I knew I felt a lot better when we were in each other's good graces. I dressed quickly in a tan sweater and brown skirt. I did wear hose since the thought of braving a winter day with bare legs was too much to think about, but I also wore a pair of brown flats instead of heels. I was somehow pleased to note how good my legs looked, even in flats.

Mom and Dad were casually reading the paper when I got to the kitchen. From their robes, I realized they had no intention of going to church. That was fine with me. I wanted just to be with Jack. They both seemed pleased that I was going to church, and doubly pleased that I was going with Jack. It turned out that dad knew Jack's father since they both worked for Vulman Industries. He said he didn't know him well, though.

Jack picked me up at exactly nine thirty. "Hi," he said with a shy smile when I slid into the car. I smiled back at him. I might have only been a girl for a few days, but I thought I could tell some definite interest on his part. I hoped it was only friendship, because I wasn't ready for anything more. Or at least, I didn't think I was.

We chatted casually on the way to church, never mentioning our situation until we reached the church parking lot. Then, Jack said, "It seems ironic to be going to church here when the go... g..."

“Are you all right?” I asked. It sounded as if he was choking.

“I’m fine,” he gasped. “I just was musing and forgot about the taboo.”

“Which one?” I asked dryly. “There are so many.”

“The one on discussing the origins of our founders,” he replied, breathing normally at last.

I thought about what he had started to say. What was ironic about...? Then it struck me. He had figured out who the town’s founders were. Given his statement, that meant... okay, so they were gods of some sort. That didn’t help me. I had a bigger problem. I had to keep two boys at bay, and I liked one of them as a friend and hadn’t formed a final opinion of the other one. Besides, so what if the Judge was Zeus or Odin or something? Was he going to wave his magic wand and help me with my problems? I didn’t think so.

I hadn’t been in a regular church service since I was a kid. I actually found it was a lot of fun, particularly after I learned that I had a fine soprano singing voice. After church, we found a little coffee shop a couple of blocks from the church and decided to try it. It wasn’t Starbucks, but it was decent.

After a little discussion on the church service, Jack looked up at me over his coffee and said, “You know, I was serious about dumping Mikki and taking you to the dance. Mikki and I don’t have anything in common, and I just can’t get past who she used to be.”

“Jack,” I protested, “we’ve been all through this before. Mikki may have been Mack, but she isn’t him now. It’s the same with Bear now that he’s Bull. They’re different people. They don’t even remember Brad and Marty; they only know Jack and Myra. I think that’s why so many of the people here who do remember who they were don’t want to talk about it. It’s like carrying around someone else’s baggage. You can’t use it, but it weighs you down.”

Jack frowned. “Do you mean to tell me you could honestly have a relationship with Bull or Bear or whoever he thinks he is?”

I shook my head. “No, Jack, I couldn’t. I don’t think I could have a

relationship, as you put it, with any guy right now. I mean, three days ago, I was still a guy myself. It still seems a little... queer."

Jack put his hand over mine. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Then, he said, "Look, first of all, you aren't a guy anymore. You don't look like a guy and I don't even believe you can think like a guy anymore. I've watched you grow more and more like girls I've known with every passing hour. You don't curse much anymore. Your dress and makeup are feminine, even when you're wearing jeans. The way you walk and talk..."

"All right already!" I interrupted, pulling back my hand and motioning for him to stop.

"Even the way you're holding your hand and fingers now."

I dropped my hand and balled it into a small fist.

"Look, Myra, you're a girl."

"You think I don't know that?"

"And I'm a boy."

"Is this where we start the 'Me Tarzan, you Jane' nonsense?"

He slumped in his chair. "I'm making a big mess of this."

Maybe he was right. The old Marty might have moved in for the kill, but not Myra. I looked at him with compassion. "Jack, I know. This is difficult for both of us. We just need to take it slowly. The dance is coming between our friendship. You need to go with Mikki, and I need to go with Bull. We'll laugh and we'll dance, that is, if I can figure out how to dance backward on the slow ones, and then we'll try to sort everything out later. Maybe by the time all the female hormones kick in on me, I'll be some little teenybopper mooning over Leonardo DiCaprio."

We both smiled at my joke. He took me home after that. I don't think either of us were still sure of what we wanted or how to proceed, but at least we were still friends.

I had forgotten how much time teenage girls spent on the phone. I had

decided to use the rest of Sunday to catch up on schoolwork. Since I had been away from school so long, it was going to take some effort to get back up to speed. But the phone seemed to ring constantly. Bull's call was the shortest. He called to tell me his therapy had gone well and he would be home shortly, so I could plan on a ride to school Monday.

Then Mikki called to give me the same information. She had visited Bull earlier in the day. Then she wanted to talk about everything. I didn't have a clue about half the things she was talking about. Who was dating who, who was screwing who, who was the hottest new young actor, who was the singer with the biggest bulge in his pants, and so on. I honestly believe it was the most long-winded, boring conversation I have ever endured. I practically needed a bimbo-to-English dictionary.

At last, I got rid of her and settled in to study Chemistry, which I was sure would be my most difficult subject. I had only been studying for about twenty minutes when Sam called. I was going to impatiently cut Sam off, but as we talked for a few minutes, I found I really enjoyed talking with her. She began to fill me in on events at school as Mikki had done, but her information consisted of things I could use. She told me about our teachers, what they were like and which of the real ones remembered who they had been. As it turned out, only Mr. Flannery, the Principal, and Ms. Torrance, the Biology teacher, had any memory of their previous lives, and they didn't discuss them with Sam. It turned out that only about a hundred or so of the students and teachers at Ovid High were real, and of that, I could expect only a couple of dozen would remember who they had been.

Sam and I talked nearly as long as Mikki and I had talked, but I found I wanted to keep on talking to Sam. I invited her over to study after dinner, and she accepted.

I took a break from studying about an hour before dinner and decided to read until it was time to help Mom with dinner. No one had told me that I would have to help, but I was certain that as a girl, I would be expected to help with dinner. I picked up a paperback book with an

action-adventure picture on the cover. I had always liked adventure novels for light reading. A few pages into it, though, I realized it was a romantic adventure, taken from the viewpoint of a young college coed who happened upon a spy ring. The hero of the book was a James Bond Junior type who, of course, was smitten by the coed. It was a book I would have thrown away a few days before, but I found myself engrossed in it, much the way as a young boy, I had devoured superhero comic books.

As expected, I helped Mom with dinner. I was actually learning a few things about cooking that as a bachelor I had never known. It was actually entertaining and creative. Of course, it helped that Mom was a good cook.

Dad cleaned up after dinner, so I was already free when Sam rang the doorbell. She gave me a girlish hug and practically led me upstairs to my room. Before we studied, there was apparently going to be some girl talk. Oh, if our real parents could have seen us now, I thought.

“So I hear you’re going to the dance with Bull,” she said when we were in my room.

“News travels fast.”

She sat down on my bed. “Can you tell me why?”

“I thought you said Bull wasn’t Bear. Why shouldn’t I go with him?”

“Well,” Sam began, “in the first place, he may not be the same. I didn’t know him as Bear, but I do know him as Bull. He’s a pompous ass. He thinks every woman should kneel down before him and unzip his fly. Second, he’s not very smart, and third, Jack is really hot for you.”

I was ready to refute the first reason. Bull had given me his promise that he would behave. As for the second, he was no Einstein—I realized that—but he was smart enough to apologize. Besides, I wasn’t looking for a lifelong commitment from him. I was just honoring a promise Myra made before I arrived to go to the dance with him. After that, well, we’d see. I didn’t think he was going to be the right guy for me. Maybe no guy was. Maybe I’d be a lesbian and ask Sam out. That

would be interesting.

The third reason, though, caught me napping. “Why do you think Jack is hot for me?”

Sam sighed, “Oh come now, Myra, I know you’re new at being a girl, but you aren’t blind. Can’t you see the way he looks at you? Don’t you notice the way he tries to be near you and even protect you? Do you think he’s going to give you an engraved invitation to a relationship. Think about when you were male. How did you act around a girl you liked?”

There had to be a time to admit the truth, not just to Sam but to myself. That time had arrived. “I never really liked a girl that way.”

Now it was Sam’s turn to be stunned. “You weren’t gay, were you?”

“Good lord no!” I laughed. “I probably had more pus—that is, sex—than most guys you’ve ever known, but it was just... sex. It wasn’t love; it wasn’t even like... It was ‘getting my rocks off.’ Of course, that’s when I still had rocks.”

“You were an emotional cripple,” she said softly.

“That smacks of pop psychology,” I told her.

“Were you close to your family?”

I shook my head. “No, I wasn’t. We were poor, and my parents came home tired to a house full of kids every night. They didn’t care about us, and we didn’t care about them, or each other for that matter. We pretty much raised ourselves. I haven’t talked to anyone in my family in years.”

“So you weren’t close to the girls you dated either.”

“No,” I admitted. “They were just grist for the old penis mill. They were fun while they lasted. Does that shock you?”

“I don’t think it does,” she said, surprising me now. “Look, Myra, everybody in Ovid is who they are for a reason. I assume you’ve figured out who created Ovid by now.”

“I think so.”

“Well, then you can imagine that the... agency behind Ovid probably doesn't think quite the same way we do. Humans think in a pretty straightforward way. If a rapist comes to Ovid, a human would turn him into a woman to give him a little of his own medicine. A human might even make sure he was raped so he'd really know how the other half lives. The powers that be might see it differently, though. They're just as likely to change the rapist into a raped girl's mother, and let her experience as a parent the anguish their daughter is going through. The concept seems to be justice, but something else as well. Some might call it mercy, but to others, it might just be irony.”

“So what is the reason I've joined the Sit-Down-to-Pee Club?” I asked, not sure where she was going.

Sam smiled, “Well, if I had to make a guess, I would say part of the reason is that you needed to be changed into a more emotional being if you were ever going to succeed in life. You've never told me what you did in the outside world.”

“I guess not,” I realized. “I was a road maintenance worker for the state. I dug ditches, filled potholes, and fun stuff like that.”

“And in spite of the fact that you are obviously bright, you had a poor education and no personal life to speak of and no future, am I right?”

“That pretty much sums it up,” I admitted, sitting down on the bed beside her.

“Did you ever stop to think that maybe one of the reasons you had the life you did was that you couldn't ever get close to people? You had no one to be proud of you, or to trust you, or to love you.”

I thought what I did next would surprise Sam. It didn't, but it did surprise me. I burst into tears. I suddenly felt her arm around my shoulders, holding onto me while my body heaved with sobs. She didn't try to talk to me; she just held me. I wouldn't have thought I had so many tears in me. I was embarrassed and hoped that my parents couldn't hear me. How could I explain it to them? Mom, Dad, I'm

crying because I never had a life before when I was a guy, but now as a girl, I have friends, and two boys who want me to be their girl and loving parents. And, oh, by the way, a bunch of ancient gods did this, and Mom isn't even real.

When the sobs became mere whimpers, I looked at Sam and said, "I'm so embarrassed."

She smiled and shook her head. "Don't be, honey. I think you just realized how much the world has changed for you. Things can be a lot better this time around. All you need to do is be a girl."

Sam helped me fix my makeup. My crying had left it with clownish streaks. Then, we talked for awhile—just girl talk, I guess. Finally, we went downstairs to the kitchen and actually studied. We hugged again at the end of the evening like the old friends we were supposed to be.

As I got ready for bed, I reflected on what I had learned. I had learned that I held my future in my own dainty hands. Actually, for the first time in years, I really had a future. So I had to be a girl to get that future. Sam was managing just fine, and so could I, I realized as sleep claimed me.

On Monday, I made good on my promise to wear jeans no matter what. I was pleased that Bull made no comment on them as well. He was a perfect gentleman as he drove Jack, Mikki and I to school. He was a changed man. Well, he was transformed, of course, but I mean he had changed his attitude. He was polite, joked around, and seemed genuinely concerned about whatever I wanted. I thought he would be my slave if I asked him to.

School went well also. English class gave me the opportunity to show off my knowledge of Shakespeare, and I aced a pop quiz in Algebra. My crowning achievement was the A I got on the History exam. It was the highest grade in the class, according to Ms. Samson, who seemed to be at a loss to understand how Myra Smithwick, a known bimbo, could have possibly known anything about the Civil War that didn't involve the length of General Grant's penis.

The day went quickly, and before I knew it, Bull was dropping me off

at my house. He gave me a chaste kiss and cheerfully waved. I had to admit, he was changing a lot. Could I be his girl friend? I still didn't think so, but it had at least risen above an impossible rating to a highly improbable one.

When I got home, my parents were extremely proud of me when I told them about my History grade. After dinner, Mom told me, "Myra, your father and I are so pleased with the way you've buckled down in school that we've decided to let you have that dress you wanted for the Christmas dance after all."

I smiled. "Gee, that's great, Mom!" I told her, even though I didn't have any idea what dress she was talking about.

"Why don't you come by the office after school tomorrow. We'll go over to March's and get it."

"Okay," I agreed. Inwardly, though, I was concerned. My tastes in clothes and the original Myra's were probably very different. I could imagine that my namesake had chosen a dress that appeared to be spray-painted on. But what the heck. I realized I probably had a closet full of dresses like that. At least, I would have some say in what I bought to wear this time.

Tuesday went by quickly and without incident. Bull continued to be a gentleman. I tried to make conversation with Mikki, but we were rapidly growing apart. She was the poster child for Bimbos of America and I was quickly developing the reputation of a serious student. Sam and I were drifting together more and more. She was starting to introduce me to her friends. Since they were all either shades or girls who couldn't remember their previous lives, I was becoming more and more immersed in 'girl talk.' You know what they say. If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it must be a duck. Substitute 'girl' for 'duck' and you have the story of my new life.

Jack and I remained friends. We rode to and from school together, but Jack always rode with Mikki, so we didn't talk much. In class, we would say a few words to each other, but Jack was becoming a little distant. If Sam was right about Jack 'having the hots for me,' he was

hiding it very well. It was probably just as well, though. After my date with Bull on Friday, I planned to swear off dating until I could decide who I was.

Trying to be interested in boys was really the hardest thing for me to manage in my new life. I had all the right equipment to be interested in them, and an endless stream of female hormones were having constant influence on my mind, but intellectually, it seemed all wrong. I could no more think about serious sex with any guy any more than I could have considered it when I was Marty. I knew that would change, though. Already, I could tell who the hunks were. If I let myself go, I found myself sneaking a peek at some guy's tight butt or his broad chest. A boyish grin from one of them would elicit a coy smile from me. I began to feel odd warm tingles from parts of my body I had otherwise come to accept as part of my new female anatomy. Time would tell.

Tuesday was a bleak, dreary day in Ovid. The sun was absent all day, and it was spitting flakes of snow when Bull dropped me off at Mom's office. I had no trouble finding it. It was a small office over a bank building. I had expected Mom to be at the front desk, but there was no one there when I looked in. There was someone in the inner office, though, which I assumed to be Susan's. I was surprised to see Susan at her desk reviewing a document.

"Myra!" she said, looking up with a smile. "Your mother is running an errand for me. She'll be back in a few minutes. It's good to see you again."

"I thought you'd be on your honeymoon," I said, taking a seat she motioned me to.

"Not for a few more days. We leave for Hawaii a couple of days before Christmas. Steven had to finish out the semester before we could go, and I had to clear my calendar as well. So how is girlhood?"

"Not as bad as I had expected," I admitted. "In fact, I think I could get to like it. I don't know about... well, you know."

"Sex?"

“Yes. It’s a little hard to think about having something inside me.”

“I think you’ll get used to the idea,” Susan said, leaning back in her chair. “You’re just sixteen. I understand a lot of girls have a problem with it when they’re your age.”

“Did you?” I asked.

Susan gave me a wry grin. “Let’s just say I was a little older than sixteen before I had sex with a man.”

“I think I will be, too. I mean, the shade that was Myra messed around. I’m pretty sure of that, but I don’t have time for that this time around. I’m determined to make something of myself. It would be a little hard for me to get a job digging ditches in this body.”

“Yes it would,” she admitted. “Fortunately, you’re really very bright. Have you given any thought to what you want to be after school?”

“Well,” I ventured, “I might want to try law school.”

Susan mulled that one over for a moment. Then, she said, “You know, I think you might be a good lawyer. I’ll tell you what. Check with me next spring. If my practice picks up—and I think it will—I might be able to arrange a part-time summer job for you.”

I beamed, “I’d like that very much.”

“Like what?” my mother called from the outer office.

“I was just telling Myra we might be able to use her in the office over the summer,” Susan explained.

I could see Mom was very proud. As we braved the winter cold on the short walk to March’s Department Store, Mom told me, “Susan is a very good attorney. I really don’t even know why she stays in Ovid. She could be a big city lawyer if she wanted to be. She must have studied a lot of criminal law in school, because she knows it cold, yet there are seldom any criminal cases in Ovid.”

“I’ll bet she knew it cold,” I thought. I wondered if she had been a criminal lawyer before she came to Ovid.

“And the fact that she’s thinking about taking you on for summer work is a credit to you,” she went on. “She doesn’t suffer fools.”

“I think it’s because I talked to her about becoming an attorney,” I explained.

“Is that what you want to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “Susan thinks I would be a good attorney. Maybe I’ll go to law school and come back here and be her partner. Then my mother would be my secretary.”

Mom laughed, “That might be fun and it might not.”

I laughed, too.

I’ve seen sporting goods stores that were bigger than March’s Department Store, but it was the biggest and finest retail establishment in Ovid. The store was three stories tall and took up about a quarter of a block, so it was probably ample for a town the size of Ovid. Still, I wondered what these people would think of a Dillard’s like they had in Oklahoma City or Tulsa. Even Muskogee where I had lived had bigger stores. In spite of its small size, the entire second floor was devoted to women’s clothing. How did women ever decide what to buy? There were dresses, tops, skirts, and pants of every possible size, color and description. Thank god I had a full closet of clothes at home, for I don’t think I could ever decide what to buy given the vast array of merchandise. As a man, all I had to do is choose from jeans or about four colors and styles of casual pants. Then for a shirt, it was usually plain, striped or plaid in a few colors. Shoes? Brown, black or tennis shoes. But women could shop all day and never look at the same style of shoes twice. No wonder women had such a reputation of being professional shoppers. With the variety available to them—us now, I suppose—it could take forever to find what you needed.

There was an entire section of what I supposed could be called party dresses. They were all short and revealing. I remembered an old girlfriend of mine telling me that every girl needed a basic black cocktail dress. Here they were, only they weren’t all black.

“Now which one was it you said you wanted?” Mom said.

I gulped. I didn’t have the foggiest idea which dress Myra had wanted. Whichever one it was, I was certain it would have been the one with the shortest hemline that showed off the most cleavage.

“This one would look darling on her,” a musical woman’s voice said from behind us.

I turned to face an unbelievably beautiful woman. She was the kind of woman men would kill just to be in the same room with. Her eyes were the bluest blue I have ever seen, and her hair was a rich gold. Her skin was absolutely flawless, and every inch of her fantastically proportioned body was firm and feminine. She was wearing a very stylish dark blue dress that, although tight, was as perfect for her figure as anything could be. A name tag identified her as Vera March, but again, as with the Judge and a couple of others I had seen in Ovid, she had a presence about her that led me to believe that if the others were gods, so was she.

She held in her flawless hands a red dress. Actually, red didn’t do it justice. It was a dark, rich metallic red that shimmered in the lights. It was short and from the cut, I was sure it would show too much cleavage, but I was somehow drawn to it. She was right. I would look good in it. In fact, I would look fantastic in it. Involuntarily, I touched the fabric. Despite its metallic sheen, it was soft and warm to the touch.

“What do you think?” she asked in a voice that was so soothing and mellow, it bordered on being hypnotic.

“I think it’s scrumptious,” I replied. Now why had I used that word? I don’t think I had ever used that word in my life.

“Why don’t you try it on?” she asked.

I had to try it on. Everything else in the store had disappeared from view, and I could only see the dress. I was drawn to it like a magnet. Without a word, I took it and walked as if in a dream to the nearest dressing room. As I was disrobing, Mom knocked on the door. When I

opened it, she handed me a package of pantyhose and a pair of red sandals with a three-inch heel. "Vera said to try these on," she told me. "She said she was sure they would fit."

I did as she asked. When I looked in the dressing room mirror, the result was nothing short of fantastic. If I had still been my old male self, I would have done anything to please the girl I saw in the mirror. I pressed my hands along my sides, thrilling to the feel of every feminine curve. In retrospect, I know I was under a very powerful spell, presumably placed on me by Vera March, but at the time, the feelings seemed perfectly natural.

I stepped out of the dressing room, feeling more sensitively than ever before the sway of my hips and the controlled bounce of my breasts. Vera March smiled a very satisfied smile, and my mother appeared stunned by what she saw.

"What do you think of it?" Vera asked my mother.

"I... I don't know what to think," she replied honestly. "Don't you think it's, well..."

"Perfect?"

"No... yes! Yes, that's it. Myra, it just looks perfect on you," Mom said decisively.

I smiled. I thought so, too.

We ended up buying the dress, shoes, and a necklace and earrings to go with it. With Vera's influence, I was one very happy girl.

The rest of the week became routine. I was beginning to establish myself as one of the top students in my class. My social life suffered, I knew. I studied every night and took advantage of every study hall period. Bull seemed very understanding. He continued to play the gentleman. Wednesday became Thursday, and I aced a Chemistry quiz. Now, I was carrying an A average on every paper and quiz I had done as Myra, with the exception of Algebra. Even there, I had strong B's.

One minor revelation occurred on Thursday. I was in the school library

doing research for a Government paper when I ran across a book on Greek and Roman mythology. I had never been very interested in the subject, but given my experience in Ovid, I scanned the book. I began to realize that the Judge had to be Jupiter, not Zeus, who was apparently the Greek version of Jupiter. Dr. Miner I suspected must be Minerva, and Vera March was a good candidate for Venus. Big deal, I thought. I didn't figure I would have to worry about them again. The damage, if you wanted to call it that, was already done to me. Then, I remembered the feelings I had experienced while trying on the new dress. Maybe the gods weren't finished with me yet. I would have to be careful.

Friday went by too quickly. I must have been the only girl in Ovid High who wasn't counting the minutes until the Christmas dance. I was starting to have severe second thoughts. I suspected the dress I had been maneuvered into buying would be far more revealing than my unspelled mind could handle. I also wondered about Bull. His old aggression seemed to be slowly returning. He had actually leered at me when I got in the car that morning. At least my efforts in school were continuing to pay off, and I immersed myself in my classes to try to get my mind off the dance.

After classes, Bull dropped Jack and Mikki off, then took me home. Parked in front of my house in the dying December afternoon, he put his arm around me with more authority than he had dared all week. He pulled me to him, and before I could stop him, kissed me gently but firmly. It wasn't as bad as it had been right after my transformation, but it wasn't that enjoyable, either. I managed to slip gently away without offending him. He gave me a wide grin and said, "I'm looking forward to tonight, babe. I'll pick you up at seven."

"Okay," I managed to reply softly. I just wasn't looking forward to an evening with Bull.

As I scrambled up to my room, I seriously considered faking an illness for the evening. The thought of wearing the sexy dress I had been spelled into buying and dancing with Bull all evening, meant I was starting to get a little stage fright. I wasn't ready to do this. It was going

to be like a stage performance, so stage fright was probably the right expression for it. And now, ladies and gentleman, Ovid is proud to present Marty Blackstone in the starring role of Myra Smithwick. It was a terrifying thought.

Mom had come home from work a little early and fixed me a quick dinner. Then, she hustled me off to my room. "I need to do something with your hair," she told me. "Go ahead and get into the lingerie you plan to wear and we'll get you ready."

When I was in the dark red bra and panties I had decided matched the dress, Mom began working on my hair. It was so long and full to begin with that I could actually feel its weight as she shifted it around. She was as nimble with hair pins and hairspray as she was with a word processor at work. I got the feeling she was a frustrated stylist. "There!" she said finally.

I looked in my mirror. She had done an incredible job. Most of my hair had been piled up on top of my head, with little wisps of hair running down my neck and around my ears. The effect was very elegant. I would look great when I got my dress on.

Mom helped me get dressed, pulling the dress over my head so as not to disturb her work. She even made a couple of makeup suggestions, although I was getting pretty adept in that department myself. It all came together, the pantyhose, shoes, purse, and jewelry until a girl who would have given Cinderella some real competition stood in front of the mirror.

"Let's go show your father," Mom said. Dad had come home while I was still getting dressed. "You look absolutely beautiful. I only wish you weren't going with Bull."

So did I, but for some reason, I replied with the answer teenage girls had probably used forever. "Mom, it's just a dance. I'm not going to marry him." Indeed, I was not. If I could pull it off, I wouldn't even be dating him after the dance.

"I know," she sighed, "but I worry when you're with him. He seems so... aggressive."

Didn't I just know it? Well, at least he had been under control for the last few days.

Dad thought I looked great, too. He pulled out a small flash camera and made me pose. I did my best, although I wasn't sure I wanted a permanent record of me in that dress. It looked as if my boobs and ass were going to be out there for everyone to see if I just twitched in the wrong direction.

Bull arrived at exactly seven. He had gone all out, in a stylish gray herringbone sport coat and a subdued, tasteful tie. The only problem was that he was so big that even a well-tailored outfit tended to look a little out of place on him. He looked like one of those huge bodyguards you always see in pictures protecting movie stars or other famous people. He had bought me an absolutely lovely corsage, but I could tell he was a little disappointed when my mother grabbed it to pin it to my ample bosom instead of letting him pin it on me. Thanks, Mom.

Bull escorted me to the car. I noticed we were alone. "Aren't Mikki and Jack going with us?" I asked.

"Not tonight, babe," Bull said pleasantly. "It's just you and me."

Somehow, that was not a comforting thought. Bull had been a perfect gentleman all week, but I was starting to see signs that his conduct was threatening to slip back into the old pattern I had experienced right after my transformation. He was starting to strut around me again and call me 'babe.' All I could do, though, was to try to get through the evening. Maybe I would talk him into sitting with Jack and Mikki.

I started thinking about Jack. I hadn't seen much of him all week. Mikki had monopolized most of his time, so the only time I saw much of him was in the car to and from school. He didn't have much to say during those times. He honestly didn't seem very happy, but maybe he was just in a pensive mood. I found myself wishing it were Jack taking me to the dance instead of Bull. Jack was a friend while Bull... well, Bull was a predator and I was the prey.

We left our coats at the temporary coat check in the hall outside the gym. Once I had taken off my coat, I felt positively naked. I looked

down at myself and could see the swell of my breasts and the narrow canyon in between them. I was sure every boy in the school would be looking lustfully at them all evening. Of course, they might be looking at my slim legs, covered in smooth nylon, just hoping that I might forget myself bend over or not cross my legs in a ladylike fashion.

Either way, I felt very vulnerable. Maybe that's why girls seek the company of one strong boy. Maybe they're just hoping he will keep the other boys away. Was that why I was with Bull? I don't exactly mean me, but rather the original Myra. It was possible that this buxom girl got so tired of the wolves circling that she agreed to start dating Bull just so she would have someone to keep them away. Then, the solution turned worse than the problem. Bull had become an aggressive, possessive nightmare. Maybe the original Myra was too frightened not to do what he said. Maybe I was, too.

I had a sister who dated a guy like Bull. Come to think of it, that was the sister who had told my real mother that she was just dating the guy, not marrying him. And now I had said the same thing to my new mother. Of course, three months later, the guy my sister had been dating knocked her up. Was that what was going to happen to me? Not if I could help it, of course. The problem was, could I help it?

I didn't want any part of sex with Bull, or any other guy for that matter. Since I was almost certainly going to be a girl for the rest of my life, I knew I would have to face that some day. Either that or be a lesbian, and frankly, girls didn't look that good to me in that way anymore. But what if Bull forced the issue? What could I do? He was big and strong. For that matter, he was persuasive, too, and charming when he wanted to be. I used to think girls were real saps to fall for some smooth talker's lines. Hadn't that happened to me? How else could I have ended up at a dance with him?

At least, there was a crowd, so Bull would be limited in what he could do. The gym was filled with students, all in their dress-up best. They were all drinking punch, eating, talking in groups, or dancing to the CDs one of the younger teachers was selecting.

I spotted Mikki and Jack and pulled Bull in their direction. Mikki was

wearing something even more revealing than I was. It was white and sparkled so you could pick her out in a crowd from a hundred yards away. Jack looked sensational in a navy blue blazer and gray slacks. He looked very preppy, a far cry from his usual drab wardrobe covered by a letter jacket. Again, I had this sudden wish that I could be Jack's date.

"You look great, Bull!" Mikki squealed. "You look like you're gonna just bust right out of that coat." To emphasize the point, she leaned over just enough to let him look down her dress while she squeezed his biceps.

"You look fantastic," Jack said quietly to me.

I actually blushed and fumbled in reply, "So do you. I mean, you look great."

We smiled nervously at each other.

The evening progressed innocently enough. With no drugs available in Ovid, the dance looked more like something out of Grease than I would have thought possible. And here I was, Olivia Newton John, right down to my blonde hair and sweet smile. A few of the guys looked as if they were sneaking out for a quick drink, though. Bull managed to join them more than a couple of times. That was all right with me, though. That gave me a little time to recover from Bull's clumsy dancing and increasingly lewd remarks. There was even one time when Mikki had joined some of her bubble headed friends in the ladies' room, leaving me alone for a few minutes with Jack, since Bull had slipped outside for another belt of what smelled like bourbon.

"Are you having a good time?" Jack asked me.

"Not really," I told him with a sigh.

"Me neither," he said with a sigh even more obvious than mine.

I looked at him. "I thought you and Mikki got along okay."

"We do," Jack agreed. "It's just that she's not really my type."

"Who is your type?" I asked coyly. Now what had made me say that?

I felt a hand barely touch my narrow waist. "You are," he said.

My heart leaped and my stomach dropped at the same time. I didn't want to be interested in any boy. I had made that very clear to myself. Yet here I was, actually glad that Jack like me. Sam had been right. Was this the way it started? I supposed it was. First, you find a guy who you sort of like, a guy who won't paw you to death the moment you say something to him other than "get lost." Then, you learn to talk to him. You find you have a lot in common. Then, you agree to go out with him and find out if you really like the same things. Then... well, then you have some decisions to make—big decisions—the kind of decisions which could affect the rest of your life. Was that going to happen now? It certainly wasn't going to happen with Bull. We had nothing in common. But Jack was another matter.

Fortunately, before I could reply, Mikki came back and Bull wasn't far behind her. We all talked together for a few minutes, although Mikki did most of the talking. I held up my end of the conversation, but Bull and Jack mostly grunted or replied in monosyllabic words. Was there a tension developing between Bull and Jack? I hoped not. Although Jack had become a guy who looked to be in good shape, Bull had become a powerhouse. He looked as if he could handle any guy in the room, Jack included, and not even break a sweat.

Eventually, we drifted apart. Bull took me out for a slow dance. I kept trying to dance apart from him a little as he kept trying to crush me against his crotch where he obviously wanted me to be aware of his formidable hard on. When the music stopped, he said, "Come on, I need a little air."

We walked out of the gym and strolled down the hall. It was too cold to go outside, so we were obviously just going to stay in the school. Suddenly, he reached over to the door to Ms. Samson's room. I was surprised to see he had a key. "I lifted it off her desk yesterday," he explained as the door clicked open. Then, without any warning, he pulled me inside the classroom, closing the door behind him.

"At last, we've got a little privacy," he murmured to me as he wrapped a beefy arm around my waist and pulled my lips up to his face. In the

faint light coming through the frosted glass in the door, I could see the look, not of a lover, but of a predator.

Desperately, I tried to pull away from him, but my struggles just caused him to hold me tighter. I held my lips grimly together while he probed at them with his tongue.

"Come on, babe," he pleaded, but there was a menace in his plea.

"You know you want me. Quit the hard-to-get routine. It's getting old."

"I don't want you," I replied, my already high voice almost squeaking in terror. His Mr. Nice Guy act was over. Bull was reverting to true form. He planned to have me whether I wanted him or not. I tried again to push him away, but my feminine strength was no match for him. I doubted if few men could fight him off, either.

"Look," he said, his voice becoming harder as he pushed me against a wall, "I've had about enough of your prick teasing. I was good enough for you before last week. Now for some reason, you seem to think you're too good for me. Well, listen, bitch, nobody died and made you Queen of England. You're my girl and you'll do what I tell you to do."

Before I could protest, he forced me to my knees. I had a sudden hysterical thought that I hadn't had time to tug my dress down and stood a good chance of getting a run in my pantyhose. What a complete female I had become. Here I was, in severe danger of being raped, and all I could think of was how my clothes looked.

Now, I was eye level with his crotch. He held my head in place with one hand, and when I experimentally tried to move it to one side, he forced it back straight so I was forced to watch as he unzipped his fly and pulled out his hard penis. As a male, I had seen plenty of dicks in my high school gym, but I had never seen one like this. It was huge and it was menacing. I could even detect a faint odor of musk. I could see every veined line in its considerable length. I had no doubt as to where he intended to put that thing, and I clamped my jaw as tightly as I could.

"Listen, you fucking cunt!" he roared, grabbing me painfully by the arm as his other meaty hand tried to push my cheeks hard enough to force

my lips open. "You either open up now and take this like the whore you are, or I'll break your arm."

I don't know if I would have done it or not. I was most certainly frightened enough. I could feel my gums hurting as he applied pressure to them. His penis was only inches from my mouth. Should I take it and then bite it? I wondered. No, I told myself. If I did that, his rage would be even worse. I wouldn't be able to bite it off, and in his pain and rage, he would probably kill me. Fortunately, I'll never know what might have happened, because a familiar voice suddenly ordered, "Get away from her, goddamn you!"

The classroom door was suddenly open, and silhouetted in the brilliant hall light was Jack. Even against the light, I could see the rage in his eyes. From down the hall, I could hear Mikki screaming, "What's happening?" as her heels clicked on the hall floor.

Bull pushed me to the floor, knocking my head against the wall. I groaned, but managed to stay conscious. Now the back of my head, my jaw, and my arm all hurt, and I realized I had twisted my ankle a little when Bull had forced me to the floor.

Bull pushed his penis back into his pants, but didn't bother to zip up. He glowered at Jack and warned menacingly, "Look, Paris, if you know what's good for you, you'll walk away."

"Out here, Bull," Jack growled, backing into the hall. "I want you out here."

"So you can run, you pussy?" Bull didn't move.

"Are you afraid?" Jack asked slyly. What was he doing? I wondered. Jack was in good shape. Anyone could see that, but he was no match for Bull. Bull had at least fifty pounds on him. Plus, his conditioning for football and wrestling meant he was in terrific shape. Jack was being very brave, but in the mood Bull was in, Jack could end up very dead.

It was the wrong thing to say to him. Bull stripped off his jacket and threw it carelessly on the floor at my feet. His tie followed. With a killing anger in his eyes, he stepped out into the hallway to confront

Jack.

To my amazement, Jack was completely calm. He had his fists clenched in a protective posture before his face. I had never seen Jack—or Brad—box, but he appeared to know what he was doing.

Bull wasn't impressed, though. He actually laughed at his former friend. "What? You think we're going to box like gentlemen? I'm gonna bust your ass, Paris."

Several of the attendees at the dance had heard the commotion and were running down the hall to watch. I managed to get shakily to my feet and step out into the hall. I nearly fell, a combination of the ordeal I had just been through and my unfamiliarity with heels that high. As I began to slip to the floor, Sam caught me. "Myra, are you okay?"

"I'll make it," I told her with a sob in my voice. "We've got to stop them!"

Sam shook her head. "Look at them. I don't think anyone can stop them."

She was right. They were both spring-loaded and ready to jump at each other's throat. There was Jack, fairly slim and agile against Bull, who looked like a mountain ready to collide with him. At last, Bull could wait no longer. He lunged at Jack like a rock launched from a catapult. I expected to see them both fall to the ground, Bull on top, but it didn't happen. At the last second, Jack neatly sidestepped Bull. I could imagine Bull dropping to the floor, rolling, and getting up to attack again. He wouldn't miss a second time.

Instead, I watched in wonder as Jack's leg shot out like lightning as Bull passed, his foot catching him in the side, just below the ribs. Bull howled in pain and dropped to the ground. He was up quickly though. "You're gonna pay for that!" he yelled. "I'm gonna kick your balls now!"

It was eerie, but Jack didn't say a word. He just continued to dance gracefully in front of Bull, his fists still in a defensive posture. Bull charged again, but this time, he adjusted his course at the last second, heading directly for Jack. But before he could reach him, the

foot jumped out again, higher than I would have thought possible catching Bull in the chin. As Bull was rocked back by the kick, Jack struck him in the gut with four quick blows from his fists. Then, as Bull reeled unsteadily, Jack spun completely around, his leg extended, aimed directly for Bull's chest. At the last instant, his foot seemed to veer slightly, catching Bull high on the shoulder instead of dead center on the chest. It was too much for Bull. He dropped with a thud to the floor, completely spent.

The silence that had accompanied the bout ended with a roar of appreciation. Jack had done what no one in the school had imagined was even possible. He had laid Bull out. Other boys were slapping him on the back and shaking his hand. Sam held me as I cried gently, more from relief than fear. The other girls were clustering around me to see if I was all right. They also cast sidelong glances at Bull sprawled on the floor. The fact that his fly was still unzipped, and that his penis was actually visible was not lost on any of them.

One person rushed to Bull's side. It was Mikki, a look of concern on her face. She cuddled him gently in her arms, while looking up with hatred at Jack. "You bastard!" she screamed. "What have you done to him?"

It became apparent to me then. I hadn't noticed it before. If I had been a girl all my life, I probably would have noticed, but I wasn't, so I didn't. Mikki had been in love with Bull all the time. That was why she had cultivated the bimbo look. She did it to please him. I doubted if the Jack who had been in place before we arrived really liked bimbos any more than my Jack did. She was waiting for her moment. Well, sister, I thought to myself, the moment has arrived. He's all yours.

Suddenly, the crowd parted. It was Dr. Miner. Oh, great, Jack and I were actually getting our lives together, and now, we were all going to be thrown out of school. Well, I wouldn't. I mean, I hadn't done anything wrong. But what if she thought I had enticed him? With my everything-out-front dress, he could claim I had led him on. That was just what the bastard would do, I thought. And even if I got off the hook, Jack was in trouble. He had given Bull the beating of his life,

and Bull had never laid a hand on him. Of course, it could have been worse. If that last kick of Jack's had hit Bull squarely in the chest, it might have caved in his entire rib cage, crushing the heart. Bull had come only inches from death.

"All right," Dr. Miner said calmly. "The dance is still in the gym. Go there now for your entertainment."

The crowd reluctantly began to shuffle back to the dance. At last, there was just Jack with Danny standing next to him, Sam and me, with Sam still holding me gently, and Bull, who wasn't going anywhere for awhile, while Mikki stroked his forehead lovingly. Dr. Miner looked at the remaining group. She was an intelligent woman, I could tell. It took her only a few moments to decide what had happened. My disheveled condition and Bull's open fly told the story.

"Mikki," she said at last, "help Bull to his feet and get him out of here. When his head clears, tell him I want to see him at ten o'clock tomorrow in my office, is that clear?"

"But," Mikki protested, "tomorrow is Saturday, and there's no school."

There was a glow in Dr. Miner's eyes as she said forcefully, "Ten o'clock in my office! Now, is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Mikki said weakly, helping Bull struggle to his feet and leading him away.

Before Bull was led out of our circle, he stopped and looked at Jack. The hatred was still in his eyes, but behind it there was... fear? He mumbled to Jack, "This... isn't... over."

Jack just quietly dismissed this bravado when he replied, "Yes, it is." The downcast look from Bull told me Jack was right.

"I hear this was a very interesting display of kick boxing," she said to Jack.

"He tried to rape Myra," Jack replied.

"Yes," Dr. Miner said drolly. "I can see that. You did well, Jack. You controlled yourself this time."

Jack's expression changed for the first time. There was alarm in his eyes. "You know?"

"Of course I know," she replied with a grim smile. "I know all about you. Don't worry, though, that's all in the past. Brad Blackstone never existed, did he?"

"I suppose not," Jack allowed.

She turned to Sam and me. "Sam, take Myra to the girl's room and get her cleaned up. Jack, you'd better take her home. Danny, stay with Jack until Myra's ready." These weren't requests; they were orders. I had a pretty good idea who was giving the orders, too. 'Miner' formed the first five letters of 'Minerva.' There seemed little doubt that our superintendent was the Goddess of Wisdom. Without another word, she walked gracefully down the hallway and back to the dance.

Sam got me cleaned up in no time. We collected our coats and said our goodbyes to Sam and Danny. Sam got me to agree to call her in the morning to make sure everything was okay. She was so sweet and feminine that it was almost impossible to imagine her as a guy. If it hadn't happened to me, I never would have believed it. Danny shook hands with Jack and got him to promise to call, too. It was easy to see that Jack and Danny were becoming good friends as well.

Jack and I walked to the car in silence. As we got in, Jack asked quietly, "Do you want to get a cup of coffee before I take you home?"

"I don't know," I replied. I was still too shell-shocked from Bull's attack to know what I wanted.

"It might make you feel better."

Yes, it might, I realized. If I went home right now, my parents would still be up. They would take one look at me and wonder what was wrong. There was no telling what they might do about it. I didn't want them doing something stupid like confronting Bull or his parents. I suddenly realized, I didn't even know Bull's parents. In any case, a cup of coffee sounded good. "Okay."

Jack wisely avoided Rusty's. It was a late-night hangout for the high

school, and I didn't want to be seen by my classmates. We picked a little donut shop just off Main Street. It was called Dunker's. If it had been in a city, I would have avoided it, especially in my new body, since it looked like the sort of place derelicts would choose to get warm and maybe sleep off a bender, but Ovid was too small for that. Instead of derelicts, the only customer appeared to be two men who looked as if they had just finished a late shift, maybe even at dad's company, Vulman Industries. They were chatting about football as we walked in, making friendly bets on the upcoming bowl games. Instead of a pimply-faced teen behind the counter, there was a heavy-set middle-aged shade who looked a lot like Mel in the old Alice TV series.

We took a booth toward the back of the shop, and Jack got us two coffees and a couple of donuts. "Any cream?" I asked him with a sniffle.

"Since when do you use cream?"

"Since I got this peaches and cream complexion," I said. "I don't seem to be able to drink it straight anymore."

He got me one of those little plastic containers of cream and a stirrer. I dumped it in the coffee, followed by a packet of sugar. Jack watched in fascination as I stirred them in the strong coffee.

"You really have changed," he remarked.

I actually found myself smiling. "When I take a shower, I notice a lot more than the way I drink coffee has changed."

"For the better or worse?"

I sighed, sipping the coffee while I thought of an answer. It tasted good, and I felt a little calmer. "Better, I think. I mean, at first, it was hard. I had been male all my life. Then, suddenly, to find that I had breasts and... and... all the rest, was a little disconcerting. Now, though, it's starting to feel more natural. I think I can see why people like Sam have adapted so well. When you spend every day being seen as a girl, you start acting like one. I guess it's like speaking a

foreign language. If all you hear day in and day out is, say, French, before long, you'll start speaking French or you'll go crazy. Then, after awhile, it starts to sound normal. You never forget English, but you start to speak and maybe even act French."

"Yeah, but what about guys?" he asked.

"What about them?"

"Well, you weren't interested in Bull, so I just wondered..."

"You just wondered if that applied only to Bull or to all guys," I finished for him.

He nodded, biting into a donut.

"There's not an easy answer for that," I told him. "I guess as a guy, I was a little like Bull. Don't get me wrong. I never forced myself on a girl, but I made love to a lot of them. Sadly, I never loved any of them, and I don't think they loved me. They were all more like the girl Bull wanted me to be.

"Your perception changes, though. Now, I look at girls, and I see friends or rivals, but they don't do anything for me. I tend to notice what they're wearing, or how they do their hair or makeup, but I don't look at their breasts or legs like I used to. As far as guys are concerned, I'm starting to notice." I blushed. "I'm starting to notice more every day."

Jack grinned at my embarrassment. "What do you notice?"

"Well," I started fumbling for words, "I've started noticing how they walk, and how they act more than how they look. I tend to notice an average guy who's confident more than a really good-looking guy who isn't. Unless the guy is really good looking, then it doesn't matter if he's a little shy..." My voice trailed off. I found I was getting lost in Jack's eyes. Did he know that last statement was about him?

"I've got some questions for you, too," I told him, once I was able to break the spell for a moment. "Where did you learn to fight like that?"

Jack sat back, reflecting for a moment. "I suppose it won't hurt to tell

you now. You realize even when you were Marty, you didn't really know anything about me. I mean, we chummed around, drank a few beers and laughed a few laughs, but you didn't really know me."

"I knew you were from Chicago," I pointed out, taking a dainty bite out of my donut.

Jack shook his head. "No, I just told you I was from Chicago. I've been there, even worked there for a few months, but I'm actually from Baltimore."

"Why lie about that?" I asked. I was starting to realize I didn't know Brad at all. I had just spent a few days with Jack, and already I knew him better than in the months I had spent with Brad.

"Because I killed a man," he blurted.

"Killed?"

"Look, Myra," he said leaning forward, "you saw what I could do with Bull tonight. I could have killed him. I almost did. But back in Baltimore, there was nothing holding me back."

"So how did it happen?" I asked softly, placing my hand on his.

"I was raised by my sister," he told me. "My parents were children of the late sixties and early seventies. They got married young and had two kids, me and my older sister, Rita. Then dad died when I was about eight of a drug overdose. Mom did the best she could, but she had a drug habit of her own and not many skills. She worked the streets to make ends meet. By the time I was eleven, she died, too.

"Rita was seventeen by then. She made sure the social workers didn't find out about me and raised me herself. She saw what drugs did to our parents, so she stayed away from them and kept me away as well. She got little jobs—you know, waitressing and stuff like that. It wasn't much, but she kept a roof over our heads."

Jack had actually sounded happy for a moment, but now, his voice took on a more somber tone. "She had bad luck with men, though. Most of the guys she dated were just wastrels, but then, when I was sixteen, she picked up with a guy who was a lot like Bull. He'd treat

her like dirt. Then, when she looked like she was going to drop him, he'd be so nice to her it made me want to puke. After he was sure he had her where he wanted her, he started physical force. It was little things at first, like Bull did to you. He'd pull her into the car, or grab her hard enough to leave a bruise."

He sipped more of the coffee, and I saw a dark look form on his face. "Then, one day after school, I came home and found out he had beaten her senseless. She was barely breathing. I tried to get to the phone and call an ambulance, but he stopped me. He told me, 'the stupid bitch will be okay. Just leave her alone'."

"But she wasn't okay, was she?" I prompted softly.

"No, she was dying," he replied. "Oh, she didn't die right away. That took months in a coma. Nothing could have saved her, but I didn't know that then. I had been taking kick-boxing lessons for three years, and I was getting pretty good. I delivered papers to get enough money for the lessons. It was the one thing I really enjoyed doing. I went after her boyfriend when he tried to stop me from calling for help. He was big and strong like Bull, but like Bull, he was slow and not very smart. I let up on Bull at the last minute tonight or I would have caved in his chest. That's what I did to Rita's boyfriend. The coroner said two ribs actually broke off and lodged in his heart. He died in seconds."

"But it was self defense, wasn't it?" I asked.

Jack shook his head. "Maybe for somebody else it would have been, but I ran up against a hotshot young Assistant DA who was looking to make a name for himself. I cooperated at first, until I realized they were trying to build a murder case against me. You see, the law believes that if you have training in a martial art like I did, it's the same as using a weapon. We were poor, too poor to get a fair chance in court. They had built up a case against me. I was the son of a hooker, and they would say my sister was probably a hooker, too. We had probably tried to roll her john, only she got hurt and he got killed."

"But nobody would believe that!" I protested.

"Maybe not," he agreed, "but show me a Public Defender who

wouldn't have settled for manslaughter and walked away thinking he had done a great job. In the meantime, I would have done ten or fifteen years. It would have taken a good attorney to get me off completely, and I couldn't afford one."

"So you ran," I concluded.

"I ran," he agreed, drinking the rest of his coffee. "So now, you know who I am."

"I do," I smiled. "And I like who you are."

We found as we drove home that it was as if it had been Jack and I out on a normal date that night. We talked about Sam and Danny, and what good friends they had become. We talked about school which we both seemed to be enjoying. We carefully avoided anything to do with Bull, Mikki, or our transformation. We were just two teenagers at the end of a pleasant evening.

Jack walked me to my door, for which I was grateful. It had melted earlier in the day, then frozen again, and my heels weren't made for walking on ice. At the front door, he waited as I got out my key and opened the door.

"Hey, look," he said as I was getting ready to go in, "do you think we could maybe, you know, go to a movie tomorrow night?"

He was asking me out on a date! I felt an odd tingling sensation all over. "Sure," I replied quickly. "I'd like that."

He grinned. "Great. Six o'clock okay? We could maybe get something to eat first."

"Sure," I smiled.

"Great," he said again, stumbling away from the door.

It was an impulse, I knew, but I had to do it. "Jack!"

He stepped back up on the front stair. "What?"

I didn't say anything. I just put both arms around him and pulled him down to me. Then, I gave him a kiss—not a little sisterly kiss, but the

deepest one I could manage. I could even feel a hardness in his crotch, but for the first time, I didn't mind. Eventually, we both had to breathe. I released him and started inside. Then, at the last second before I closed the door, I gave him my most feminine smile and said, "Thanks, Jack. I had a wonderful evening."

As the door closed on his bright smile, I realized it was true. I really had had a wonderful evening.

"So what happened then?" I heard Diana ask, snapping me out of my trance.

"I don't pick where the stories end," I told her. "It's like working for a movie director. He gets to pick the ending. I just show the film and sell the popcorn."

"I know that, silly," she laughed, "but what have you heard? That was just last Saturday. Are Myra and Jack an item now?"

"Yes, I'd like to know, too," another voice said from behind me.

I turned. "Susan!" I exclaimed. "I didn't see you come in." Of course, I had spent the last thirty seconds ago in a trance.

"I just got here," she said, sitting down beside me. "I dropped off some papers for the Judge and left them on your desk. They said you had left early, so I took a chance that you came by here first."

"You know me too well," I replied, only half joking. Since her transformation, Susan and I had become the good friends that everyone believed we were. They thought we had gone to school together. Little did they know we had only met a few weeks before.

"Anyway," she continued, "I heard you talking about Myra and Jack. May I join you?"

"Certainly," Diana answered. "Try the house Chardonnay. It's really great."

"Thanks," she said as a waiter came up to the table, "but I think I'll stick with Diet Coke."

Susan never drank alcohol. It would help her maintain that beautiful trim body she had been given. In her gray suit, she looked like a lawyer who had just stepped out of a TV show. Ovid had been very good to her. "So when do you start your honeymoon?" I asked.

"Tomorrow," Susan said triumphantly. "That's why I dropped those papers off today. In less than twenty-four hours, Steven and I will be on our way to Hawaii. Then, it'll be Christmas on Maui."

Lots of people take second honeymoons, I mused, but since Susan and Steven had been man and wife when Susan was a man, they were the only couple I knew who were taking their second one with their sexes reversed. Hmm, I'd have to talk Jerry into a second honeymoon some time since we had never really had a first one.

The waiter brought Susan her Diet Coke, and we huddled over the table like three sorority girls discussing their last dates.

"I don't really know that much," I began. "Jack lives just a block down from our house, and I've seen him walking hand-in-hand with Myra a couple of times. If they're not in love, it's a pretty good imitation."

"I've seen the same thing," Susan confirmed. "They came by the office to see Dori on Monday. I've never seen her look happier. She and her husband both like Jack. And the way Jack and Myra look at each other, I'd say they're an item."

"You might be interested in Mikki and Bull," Diana said coyly.

"What about them?" I asked. I guess when you're a goddess, you have access to information we mere mortals don't have.

"They're an item," Diana told us. "In fact, the kids all call them the Velcro Twins since they never seem to be apart."

"I guess it's better than the Asshole Twins," I commented dryly.

"True," Diana and Susan said together.

I took another sip of my wine. "Still, I hate to see a big prick like Bull make out. He gets a cute girl in Mikki, and a chance at a great college and professional football career. And Mikki does okay as a result, too."

“Don’t be too sure,” Diana cautioned.

We both looked at her, puzzled. She ignored us and took another sip of her wine, finishing the glass and signalling the waiter for another round. I really didn’t want another, but what the hell. I had to know what she was getting at. The waiter took our lunch orders and went back for our second round of wine. Susan, of course, stayed with Diet Coke.

“Okay,” I demanded when the waiter dropped off our glasses, “spill it.”

“Don’t you think our waiter has a cute little tush?” Diana smiled, ignoring my demand.

“Don’t worry,” Susan said, “I think I may know what she’s hinting at. That’s why I got called in on the case.”

Diana just smiled and listened.

“You see, Cindy,” Susan went on, “Marty and Brad weren’t even supposed to be here. You’ve heard the old expression ‘Man plans and the gods laugh?’ Sometimes, it’s the other way around. The Judge called the highway department knowing that Mack and Bear were in the area. Their supervisor dispatched them at once, as the Judge had planned. But the supervisor didn’t trust either one of them to get the job done right, so he sent two more men, Marty and Brad, as insurance.

“When Officer Mercer picked all of them up, the Judge found that Brad and Marty had been picked up in his trap, too. He determined that although both of them had a pretty good idea that Mack and Bear were pushing drugs, they had said nothing to anyone. This angered the Judge, because he hates drugs more than anything, except maybe child molesters. So Brad and Marty weren’t guilty of selling or using drugs, but they had stood by while it went on.”

“So this was one of the gray areas the Judge said he might use you on,” I surmised.

Susan nodded. “Exactly. Mack was supposed to become Myra, and Bear would be Bull. They would end up with each other, presumably

unhappily ever after. Am I right about that, Diana?”

“Right on the mark,” Diana confirmed, raising her glass in mock salute.

“Okay,” I broke in. “So why did the Judge change things so Marty would become Myra?”

“Because,” Susan continued, “I asked him to. That was why the Judge and I had a long pre-trial conference. I asked the Judge to give Marty and Brad the opportunity to redeem themselves from both their pasts and doing nothing about the drug dealing. He determined that the best way to handle that would be to shuffle the deck a little bit.”

“Shuffle the deck?” I asked.

“Yes. Bear became Bull, as planned, and I think the Judge has something more in mind for him. But Marty became Myra instead of Mack. This allowed Myra a chance to escape Bull’s influence and be her own person. Mikki never could have done that, even if she was given the opportunity to remember who she had been. If Myra had used the same tactics she used as Marty, she would have been a dropout who couldn’t bring herself to fight Bull’s behavior any more than Marty fought Bear’s. The Judge created Mikki at the last minute, shade family and all, just to place her where she would have been as Myra if our new Myra redeemed herself.”

“Then Jack was a last-minute creation, too,” I guessed.

“Exactly,” Susan agreed. “The Judge found out about Brad’s brush with the law. Jack, or Brad, was right, by the way. In my old life, I handled murder cases. The system often runs over the poor since they can’t afford an adequate defense. At the very least, Brad would have spent time in prison for manslaughter, and that would only be if the Public Defender was a good one. It was a low profile case, so the odds of getting a good one were slim and none. In any case, Jack needed to come to grips with what he had done and win this time without displaying lethal force.”

“What would the Judge have done if Jack had killed Bull?” I asked.

Susan shrugged. "I'm not sure. It never came up."

"I can answer that," Diana said.

"Hey, wait a minute," I interrupted. "I thought two humans couldn't discuss the nature of any of the gods here in Ovid."

"They can't normally," she explained, "but when one of us allows it, it can be done. If I were to leave right now, you and Susan wouldn't be able to discuss it directly. It's for our convenience, not yours."

"So what would have happened?" Susan prompted.

Diana leaned forward again. "It would have gone very bad for Jack. Murder isn't allowed here in Ovid. The event would have been eliminated from everyone's mind, and a shade would have come in to play the part of Bull. There might have even been some tears in the fabric of Ovid, causing some of our changees to assume new roles. Jack would most certainly no longer be human."

I shuddered at the thought. On the surface, Ovid was an idyllic place, but just as Disneyland was honeycombed with concrete tunnels and the real devices that made the fantasy work, there was a honeycomb of rules and magic which made Ovid work, and some of that honeycomb was not pleasant. I knew that some of the oak trees in Sooner Park had once been human.

"Okay," Susan said, "but, Diana, set our minds at ease. What's going to happen to Bull?"

"Well, only one event is cast in stone," she explained. "Most of the other factors are variable. Mikki will probably get knocked up by Bull, but it won't be a happy union. Mikki will probably end up at Randy Andy's waiting tables and fending off pinches on the ass. She'll be unhappy, and she'll make sure Bull knows it."

"But I thought Bull was going to be a college football star and an NFL prospect," I pointed out.

"He probably would be," Diana agreed, "but in the third game next fall, the opposing defense will push the offensive tackles and guards out of the way allowing a linebacker to charge straight through knock Bull on

his big butt. That's the event cast in stone. It will cause a bad exchange between the center and quarterback, resulting in a game-losing fumble. Bull's substantial weight will come down on that knee he just injured in wrestling. As a result, the knee will be too weak for college ball and certainly too weak for pro ball. Bull doesn't have the smarts to get into college, so he'll be stuck here in Ovid for the rest of his life."

"Doing what?" I asked.

Diana shrugged. "That will be up to him. It's too much trouble to try to pull all the strings. Who knows? Maybe he'll end up digging ditches for the City of Ovid."

We all had a little chuckle at Bull's expense. It couldn't happen to a nicer guy. Ovid had given some of us a new chance, even if it had changed our sexes, but for some, like Bull, there would be no second chance. Only now, instead of being content with the nowhere life he had as Bear, he would always wonder what might have been if his knee had stayed healthy. The same would be true for Mikki. It was a fitting fate.

"Well," Susan said seriously as she took another sip of Diet Coke, "I had no idea the Judge could be so manipulative. I'm certainly glad he didn't have a chance to manipulate me."

Diana and I looked at each other, momentarily stunned. Susan had most certainly been manipulated by the Judge into coming to Ovid and accepting her new role as a woman. Then, we looked at Susan, who was using the glass of Diet Coke to hide a coy smile. She knew! When...?

Diana began to laugh. It was infectious, and I began to laugh, too. But it was Susan who was laughing the loudest of all.

Ovid IV: The Bank Robbers

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For the Captain

The light breeze that blew up my skirt as I crossed Main Street on my way to Susan's office was almost warm. One pleasant surprise for me in Ovid had been that spring came much earlier to Oklahoma than it did to Indiana. Here it was, only the last week of February, and already the sun had gained strength and the air was warming. We all knew it could still snow again before spring truly came, but the days would continue to get warmer in spite of further snows.

I had now been a woman for over four months, and I was starting to really think like a woman, I realized, as I contemplated a little expedition after lunch with Susan and Diana to March's Department Store to scope out the latest spring fashions. Maybe I could find something for Easter for both me and my daughter, Michelle. It was hard to imagine thinking this way just a few short months ago, but I had learned to be happy in Ovid. I had a wonderful loving husband and two great kids. So what if they had all once been my fraternity brothers at Notre Dame? They didn't know that; they remembered nothing of their past lives.

Besides, I had a great job, too. Being Administrative Assistant to the Roman God, Jupiter, was one heck of a job. Of course, officially, I was secretary to the Judge, but the growing community of changees in Ovid who remembered their previous lives knew what that really meant.

The Judge had cleared his calendar for the day, and since it was Friday, that meant an easy start to the weekend. Diana had called and asked me if I'd like to have a lunch of takeout Chinese in Susan's office. She had already cleared it with Susan, who had given her secretary, Dori, the day off. I had told her it sounded great to me, so we made the date. Now, here I was, hurrying up to Susan's office.

The outer office was empty, but I heard Susan call, "In here, Cindy."

Susan and I had gotten to be good friends, and our husbands were starting to get chummy as well, but until that day, I had never been in Susan's office. It looked very... well, lawyerly. The furniture was conservative and the walls were a nondescript tan, as was the carpet. One whole wall of her office was lined with law books. I was sure, as nice as it was, that it was nothing compared to the office she must have had in Dallas when she was a he and one of the top criminal lawyers in the country.

"You look nice today," she said with a smile, motioning me to a small conference table she had obviously cleared for lunch.

"Thanks," I said, taking the offered seat. After walking over from City Hall in heels, I was glad for the opportunity to sit down. I still forgot that high heels weren't made for long walks and my feet ached. "So do you." She did, too. She was wearing a very professional looking gray suit with a rose silk blouse. I, by contrast, was wearing a dark blue sweater dress, but then again, I didn't have the image of being a lawyer to maintain.

"Am I late?" a voice called from the outer office.

"No," Susan called. "Cindy just got here. Come on in, Diana."

A tall, stunningly beautiful American Indian woman, coal black hair in braids and wearing a traditional deerskin dress and moccasins entered the room. Incongruously, she was carrying a sack with a couple of bottles in it under one arm and a brown sack with Chinese characters on it under the other arm. "Princess Diana Wintermoon at your service," she said with a grin. As we watched, the dress resolved itself into a smart tan suit and the moccasins became three-inch heels. The braids unwrapped themselves and resolved into a mane of black, wavy hair. She asked, "So what do you think?"

"Do Indians really have princesses?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I think so. If they don't, they should. Now let's get this bottle of wine open. I really need a drink."

“So what have you been up to this morning that you need a drink?” Susan asked. As a teetotaler, I suppose Susan couldn’t really imagine why anyone, especially the Goddess Diana would ‘need’ a drink.

“Because I’ve spent the entire morning in a Council meeting.”

“But City Council doesn’t meet until Monday,” I pointed out.

She frowned. “Who said anything about City Council? This was the Olympic Council.”

“You’re on the Olympic Committee?” I asked without really thinking. There was still enough male in my mind to think of ‘Olympics’ as only sports.

Diana looked at me with a patronizing smile. “Was that a joke, or are you being uncharacteristically dense today?”

“Oh,” I said, abashed. “That Olympic Council.” It certainly explained where the Judge had been all morning. He had mentioned the Olympic Council to me shortly after I went to work for him. It was like a corporate Board of Directors meeting where all the gods got together to discuss the affairs of Ovid and whatever else came to mind.

“Yes, that Olympic Council,” Diana agreed. “We met this morning in San Francisco at the Fairmont. Thankfully, the meeting got out in time for me to get over to Celadon in Chinatown and pick up the food.”

I had wondered where she had gotten it. There wasn’t a Chinese restaurant in Ovid. I considered that a serious oversight on the part of the gods.

“Anyhow,” she continued with a tired smile, “the meeting was a particularly tedious one.”

Knowing Diana as I did, I realized any meeting which she was not in charge of was probably, to her, a tedious meeting. I think I would have found it very interesting. Apparently even many of the gods who had little to do with Ovid attended, so I imagined it would have been a very enlightening meeting for humans like me. Had I been there, I might even have learned why they were doing all of this.

“What happened?” Susan asked, removing a bottle of chilled white wine and a plastic bottle of Diet Coke from the bag. She then produced three tumblers from her credenza and poured for each of us, reserving the Diet Coke for her own glass.

Diana gratefully accepted her wine and took a satisfying sip. “Well, of course, some of it I can’t talk about. You two are my best friends in Ovid, so I’d love to tell you everything that went on, but the Judge would have my head on a platter if I did.”

Given the Judge’s background, that was more of a potentially real penalty than an outsider might have imagined.

“I can tell you, though, that both of you are on Marty Bachman’s enemies list,” she confided.

“Why?” I asked, taking a sip of my own wine. I hadn’t read the label, but it was an excellent Chenin Blanc. Diana had excellent taste.

“Because of Myra Smithwick,” Diana explained. “You helped her out, and Marty had his sights on her. He thought she’d be a fine waitress in his little place.”

Marty Bachman ran a dive called Randy Andy’s. Being recently cast in the role of a proper wife and mother, I had never been in the place. I had heard it was pretty tame by big city standards, but in Ovid, it had the reputation of being a den of iniquity. It was basically Hooters with even less class, if one could believe the stories.

“All we did was help Myra get pointed in the right direction,” Susan explained. Actually, I had done very little for Myra, but Susan was even considering having her work in her office over the summer.

“That’s the point,” Diana said. “Marty was at the meeting, and...”

“Wait a minute,” I interrupted. “What was he doing at a meeting of the gods?”

Diana frowned. “You mean you didn’t know?”

Both Susan and I shook our heads.

“Oh, well, there’s something you need to know,” Diana continued.

“Marty is one of us. He’s a god.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I blurted out. “There’s a Roman god running a sleazy bar?”

“It’s really not as unusual as you might think. On the whole, we’re a pretty earthy bunch. Besides, Marty is known as Bacchus in mythology. Do you know who he was?” Diana asked.

“Sure,” I replied. “Wasn’t he that fat little drunk god in Fantasia who kept falling off his donkey?”

Diana leaned forward. “If you ever talk to him, never under any circumstances should you mention that movie to him. He hated that movie so much that he completely destroyed all traces of the Disney movie, Hansel and Gretel.”

“But there is no such Disney movie,” Susan protested.

“Exactly,” Diana said with a sly smile. “Not anymore.”

Susan was still thinking about that when I asked, “Okay, so tell us about Bacchus.”

“Well,” Diana began, settling into her chair. She was really enjoying this. “Marty Bachman is the Judge’s illegitimate son, so he indulges the little idiot. Marty wanted a bar and strip joint, but the Judge wouldn’t go that far. Instead, he offered Marty a bar and, as long as it stays discrete, permission to do what little prostitution Ovid has.”

“He’s the Judge’s illegitimate son?” Susan echoed. “Our Judge? He has a bastard?”

“You sound surprised,” Diana observed with a wicked grin. “You must not have read much mythology when you were a kid.”

“I didn’t.”

“Then you wouldn’t realize,” she went on, “that the Judge and all the other gods around here were not exactly paragons of virtue. There was more philandering and incest on Mount Olympus than in a Mississippi trailer park. The reason the Judge went along as far as he did with Marty is just to keep the little shit where he can see him. He’s

been nothing but trouble for centuries. Susan, you've been doing more reading about us lately. What's your impression of Bacchus?"

"Well," she offered, "if half the stories I've read about him are true, he's someone to steer clear of."

"Not only are half the stories true, but the stories don't even tell the half of it," Diana said darkly. "He's the flimflam man of the gods. He can talk someone into doing almost anything, appearing to be a friend, only to lead them to destruction. If you think about it, that's what happens to a lot of heavy drinkers. They do things under the influence of alcohol—or Bacchus—that they would never do if they were sober."

"He sounds like a pimp," Susan commented.

"He's been that," Diana agreed, "and worse."

"Well," I said hoisting my wine glass, "here's to the God of Wine. May he stay on his side of town."

Two other glasses clicked mine in agreement.

"Now, to other things," Diana said primly.

"Yes," I agreed. "You want a story, and I'll bet I know which one you want."

Diana smiled.

"I'll bet I know, too," Susan added. "Things were a little slow around here before the bank robbery."

"So let's get to it!" Diana exclaimed.

"Uh, will Susan be able to watch, too?"

"She just needs to position herself looking over my shoulder," Diana told me.

I relaxed in preparation for falling into the trance which would allow them to see the story. It started on a damp Saturday almost two weeks ago...

“So what do ya think of the family business, Little Brother?”

The brown landscape of an Oklahoma winter shot past us at eighty miles an hour as the nondescript ten-year-old white Dodge strained to keep at speed. It was hot in the car. Jimmy Ray liked it that way, so the searing heat from the engine pumped raw hot air into the car causing me to sweat. Or maybe it wasn't the only thing causing me to sweat.

“Waddaya say, Bobby Joe?” he said cheerfully though tobacco-stained teeth.

“Keep your eyes on the road,” I suggested with a quaver in my voice.

“Don't you worry none about that, Little Brother. Old Snow here practically drives hisself. He's gotten me out of a scrape or two. It's really Enos's car, and he keeps her purring.”

Enos, half asleep in the back seat, grunted at the sound of his name.

I didn't want to think about what he called a scrape or anything else my brother had been up to for the last fifteen years. I didn't even want to know what he was up to now. I just wanted to go home, but I knew deep down that home was probably not an option. I could never go home again.

The last time I had seen my big brother had been when I was only seven. Mom always said he took after my dad, and I knew now it was true. That last time, when Dad had left for good, taking Jimmy Ray with him, my last thoughts of them had been how much he really was like dad. He was tall and lanky, with a mean look in his eyes and a devilish grin stamped permanently on his face. If he hadn't been my big brother by five years, I would have hated to see him coming down the street toward me. I would have run the other way.

But for all of his faults, Jimmy Ray looked after me when we were boys. None of the other kids dared bother me, because they knew Jimmy Ray would have them for breakfast. When Jimmy Ray got a little bigger, even Dad thought twice about beating on me when Jimmy Ray stepped in the way. Of course, he never stepped into the way to

help Mom. No surprise there. I knew even then that Jimmy Ray would most likely grow up to be a wife beater like our father.

Gus Malone, my Dad, was about the roughest of the rough on the near South side of San Antonio. In an area populated mostly by Hispanics and troubled by gang activity, most folks gave Gus Malone a wide berth. Sure, he was slim, but he was quick and deadly. One move in his direction could get you cut in a hurry. I think he actually delighted in seeing the fear in a man's eyes when he went at them with a knife. He made his living doing mostly odd jobs, including being muscle for some of San Antonio's most notorious underworld figures. He never talked about his work, for which I was later grateful. If I had known what he was capable of when I was a small child, I would probably have died from fright.

Jimmy Ray was probably the only thing that saved my mother and me from some awful fate at the hands of my father. If there was anything in the world that Gus Malone could be said to have loved, it was Jimmy Ray. They were just too much alike, and even as a small boy, I could see that my father wanted Jimmy Ray to be just like him.

Dad split on a rainy night fifteen years ago. He came home that night, his shirt covered in blood, and a look of disgust on his face.

"Goddamned piece of shit up and died on me," he muttered to my mother. "Now every fuckin' piece of shit cop in the state'll be looking for me. I'm out of here."

"But, Gus, where are you going?" my mother pleaded. "What are the boys and I going to do?"

"I don't much care," he said without any emotion. I was actually pleased and frightened at the same moment. I was pleased Dad was going to be out of my life. That meant no more beatings. But I was frightened because Mom was frightened. I was too young to know why.

Mom was frightened because as poor a provider as Dad had been, he was better than nothing. Mom had gotten pregnant when she was sixteen, so she had dropped out of school to get married and raise a

family. Dad was the old-fashioned kind. No wife of his was about to work, so Mom had no education and no work experience. The sole support of her life, as poor as it was, was walking out the door, leaving her destitute with two boys to raise.

Then Jimmy Ray did something which probably saved Mom's life, although he didn't do it for that reason. At twelve, he was already man-sized, and he was proving himself to be, if not smart, at least sly. "Dad, take me with you," he said. In most twelve year olds, it would have been a plea. With Jimmy Ray, though, it was a business proposal.

"You're too young, boy," Dad said with a note of regret in his voice.

"I ain't that young," Jimmy Ray argued. "Sides, I can watch your backside. Ain't no cop gonna be lookin' for two. They'll think you lit out by yourself."

Dad was seriously considering it, I knew, even at seven. At last he nodded his head. "All right, boy, you get to the car. We gotta go now."

Jimmy Ray winked at me and bolted out the door, Dad right behind him, leaving me and Mom behind. It was the last time I ever saw my father.

Mom and I managed to get by after they left. The police did, indeed, visit us not an hour later. According to them, Dad had beaten a man to death over gambling debts. Mom told them truthfully that she didn't know where he had gone. When they left, life settled into something almost normal. In fact, it actually improved a little. Jimmy Ray had become quite a handful for Mom, so when he left, she seemed to actually have more energy than before. She did her best, getting a job as a waitress at a local coffee shop. It wasn't much, but it kept a roof over our heads.

For a while, life got better. Mom was a lot stronger inside than she looked. She took care of herself and me. She got neighbors to look after me while she worked as many hours as she could. Then, when she came home, she only had time for me. It was a hard life, but a happy one. We were a family, just Mom and me.

After a few years, though, the hours and the standing took their toll on her. She got more and more tired. By the time I was in high school, I could see the toll of the years in her face. It was lined with age, framed by prematurely gray hair, and by the time I had graduated from high school, she was a thirty-seven-year-old elderly woman. I know how that must sound, but anyone who had known her would have known what I meant. Her shoulders were stooped by the weight of the world, and her feet were so crippled from long hours standing and inadequate medical care that she hobbled rather than walked.

She died the summer after I got out of high school, just before her thirty-eighth birthday. The doctor said it was a weak heart, but I think she just got tired of living. She had forced herself to go on until she saw me safely graduate from high school, and I think that then, she decided she had done all she could in this life and gave it up gladly.

I had grown up to be more like my mother than my father. I don't mean that I was effeminate or anything. I was a normal boy with a healthy sex life. Of average looks and just six feet in height, I was slender with nondescript brown hair, and I got my share of girls, but not more than that. I ran a little track and played a little basketball, mostly sitting on the bench, but wasn't big enough or strong enough for the rigors of high school football in Texas, where it's more of a religion than a sport. I exhibited none of my father's dubious qualities, as I was neither strong nor cruel, and I had made the decision early in my life to get a decent education and make something of myself.

That proved hard to do for many reasons. College is expensive, and although I was a good student, I wasn't scholarship material. When Mom died, she left nothing behind but debts, so there was not even a modest inheritance to further my goals. I moved north after being accepted at Wichita State University in Kansas. There, I found a job as a bellhop at a local hotel and began to slowly further my education. I had decided to try to get by on as few student loans as possible, so my job was my primary source of funds. By the time I was twenty-two, I had managed to make it to the equivalent of my junior year. I figured I would be able to work and go to school with the goal of graduating by

the time I was twenty-five.

My life came crashing down on a rainy February Friday night, but I didn't know it at the time. I had decided to stay home that night. I didn't have to work, I was between girls, and the weather was lousy. It was one of those storms that strikes the central plains in the late winter that begins as a cold rain which changes at nightfall into freezing drizzle, making the roads into a skating rink. I ordered a pizza in and decided to get ahead in my schoolwork. I was a business major, and business statistics was killing me, so it was a good time to buckle down.

About ten minutes after I ordered the pizza, there was a knock on my door. They were fast with the delivery, I thought, swinging the door open. To my surprise, there was no pizza man at the door. Instead, there was a man, just a few years older than me, who looked very familiar. He was tall and lanky, but at a glance, I could see strong arms and powerful hands. His hair was fairly short and the same color as mine.

The man grinned at me, hands in his pocket and freezing rain dripping from his hair. I could see he had a two-day growth of beard and a gold earring in his right ear. "Bobby Joe?" he asked suddenly.

I hadn't heard that name in years. I had gone by the name of Rob ever since junior high. Suddenly, I knew who he looked like. He looked like my father, only younger. There was only one person in the world he could be. "Jimmy Ray?"

"In the flesh, Little Brother," he laughed, pulling his hands out of his pockets and throwing them around me.

I had thought I would never see my brother again. As a child, I had fantasies about him coming back to see me. Then, the fantasy always turned into a nightmare as Dad would be with him. Remembering that, I looked over his shoulder, but the hallway was empty. He was alone.

I invited him in, of course. We had been close in spite of the difference in our ages. I had no illusions about being close again. I was sure we had grown well apart, but he was my only brother. In the words of our

South Texas forebears, kin is kin.

In looking back on the events of that night and the day to follow, I can't say I was really happy to see Jimmy Ray. Time had healed the wounds of life with my father and Jimmy Ray, and his return had reopened those wounds. I had no illusions about what kind of a man Jimmy Ray had grown up to be, and I wanted him out of my life before whatever troubles surrounded him became my troubles as well. But to repeat myself, kin is kin.

The pizza came minutes later, and over pizza and beer, we got down to catching up at the kitchen table.

"So where's Dad?" I ventured. I might as well get that one out on the table, I thought.

Jimmy Ray shrugged. "We parted company a long time ago, Little Brother. Last I heard, he headed west. Denver is what I heard. Somebody told me he's doing time in Canon City."

"Canon City?"

"State pen, Bobby Joe. Armed robbery."

There was more to the story than Jimmy Ray was willing to tell me. Of that, I was certain. Had he been in on the robbery with Dad? Probably, I thought. I decided I didn't want to know any more. I would enjoy my evening with Jimmy Ray and send him on his way in the morning. I remembered that evening long ago when Dad had left with him, and how the police had come to the door hours after he left. Would they come to my door after Jimmy Ray left? It was possible. No, it was more than possible. It was probable. I wanted him out of my life quickly.

I brought him up to date on my life and on Mom's death. He was interested in my life, but Mom's death meant nothing to him. It rated only a disinterested shrug. He told me about his life as well, but I suspected little of it was true. He bragged of places he had been and things that he had done, but none made any sense nor was there any pattern to them. I was sure in my own mind that he had spent most of

those years with Dad, involved in one illegal activity after another.

“So where are you off to next?” I asked him, hoping that he would take the hint and be gone quickly.

He grinned. He knew what I meant, I was sure. “Don’t worry, Little Brother. I’m just passing through. I’m heading south—maybe even back to San Antonio. First, I’ve got to hook up with a business associate down in Ark City.”

Ark City was Arkansas City, a small town an hour south of Wichita. Kansans pronounced it as if it were “Ark Kansas” instead of like the state. “So when do you have to go?” I asked as casually as I could.

“Going tomorrow if you can take me,” he replied. “I took the bus to Wichita and a cab to your place. I’d sure appreciate the ride.”

Why not? I didn’t have to work until Saturday evening, so I had the time. Besides, it guaranteed that he’d be out of my life again. I agreed to take him in the morning in time for a ten o’clock meeting with his partner who had gone on ahead of him to visit his own relatives in Tulsa. I didn’t ask what he and his partner did for a living. Whatever it was had to be illegal. The less I knew, the less I had to forget.

We got up early the next morning, stopped off for a big breakfast, which Jimmy Ray paid for, expansively leaving a nice tip for the waitress. He could be charming when he wanted to be. I thought he was going to charm the waitress right out of her uniform, and given the tip, maybe that’s what he had in mind. That was the last thing I wanted, though. I didn’t want him hanging around Wichita. I wanted him back on the road again.

The drive to Ark City was pleasant enough, taking us through several small towns along the way. Traffic was light since the weather was cold and gray. At least the ice on the roads had melted, but the clouds were threatening. A difference of only a few degrees might turn the roads into ribbons of ice. It was the perfect kind of Saturday morning to stay home in front of a warm fire with a cup of coffee and a good book. I thought when I got back home, I would do just that.

“Here we are, Little Brother,” Jimmy Ray said, indicating for me to pull into the parking lot of a small bank. “There’s the car over there, so Enos is here.” He had indicated an old white Dodge, maybe ten years old. “Come on in before you go, Bobby Joe. I’ll introduce you to Enos.”

“That’s okay,” I replied, anxious to get away. “I’ll meet him some other time. I...”

I looked down to see that Jimmy Ray was holding a pistol. It was aimed at me. “I want you to meet him now,” he said with a malicious grin.

Never in my life had someone held a gun on me. I felt my knees go weak. I didn’t really know this man. The Jimmy Ray I knew left home when he was twelve and I would never know him again. The man holding the gun on me was someone else. Jimmy Ray had become just like my father, I realized. “Why are you doing this to me?” I asked him, a quaver in my voice.

“Don’t be such a pussy, Bobby Joe. You’re my brother, and I want to show you what you’re missing.”

“I’m not missing anything,” I said.

“You’re missing everything,” he retorted. “You’re wasting your time going to school and waiting tables when you could be with me. I always looked out for you when we were kids. I’m gonna look out for you now. I’m giving you a chance to take Dad’s place in the family business. Shit, boy, I make more on a good afternoon than you’ll make in a year with that fuckin’ degree. Come on.”

The gun hidden in his jacket, we walked across the parking lot to the old Dodge. “I didn’t cab it to your place. I had Enos drop me off at your place last night,” Jimmy Ray told me as we walked. “We need three to make a team. Two of us can hit the bank while Enos stays in the car with the engine running. That old Dodge of his may not look like much...”

But she’s the fastest ship in the galaxy, I thought. Sorry, Jimmy Ray,

but you aren't Han Solo.

"...but she's a hell of a fast car. Enos has had her for years, he tells me. He even gave it a name. He calls it 'Old Snow.' Now ain't that a kick in the ass? He loves that car like it as a woman, and he keeps Old Snow in prime condition."

"So you've been working with him for a long time?" I asked.

As we walked across the parking lot, Jimmy Ray laughed. "Naw. We just been workin' together for the last couple of months. Ain't too many long term partnerships in this business."

I imagined that would apply to me as well.

Enos got out of the car. He was a tall heavy black man with a dark complexion and a scar across his face. When Jimmy Ray had introduced us, he said, "I don't like for Enos to go in the bank. With his size and that scar, there's just too much of a chance someone will ID him. 'Sides, he don't like guns. Now I ask you, Little Brother, what good is a big ol' boy like Enos here without a gun? Well, I'm gonna tell you, old Enos here can drive like the wind, so he's gonna stay with the car while you and me knock over a bank. Now put on this mask."

He handed me a black ski mask. "Jimmy Ray, I don't want any part of this."

"You put on that mask or I'll put a slug in you right now!" Jimmy Ray growled, sticking the gun in my ribs for emphasis. "You got raised too long by our mama. You're nothin' but a mama's boy. Today, Little Brother, were gonna get you a set of balls. Now put on the fuckin' mask!"

I obeyed. He seemed just crazy enough to shoot me. I knew this was a turning point in my life. I don't know what would have happened if I had told him no. If he had shot me then and there, he would have had to make a run for it without robbing the bank. But I didn't want to take the chance. If I was wrong, I would be dead.

"That's better, Bobby Joe. Now here!" He thrust two large cloth sacks into my hands. "I'll do all the fancy work. You just keep your mouth

shut, go over to the tellers and fill these bags with money. Now you understand?"

I nodded nervously.

"And don't get any ideas about being a hero. I'll shoot you down where you stand, Little Brother."

Enos stood by the car while Jimmy Ray and I, masks in place, walked into the bank. My life was going to change in that moment, I knew. Eventually, we would be caught, and no one would ever believe that I was as frightened of being shot by my brother as any of the innocent people in the bank. The charge would be armed robbery, and I would spend the next twenty or thirty years in jail, being rehabilitated for a crime I never planned to commit.

In that moment, I almost bolted. So what if my brother shot me? It might be merciful compared to the fate that awaited me when we were caught. Or maybe we would be gunned down by the police. Then, I would go to my grave as a criminal. No tears would be shed for me.

I was still feeling sorry for myself, trying to think of some course of action that would save me from the fate that eventually awaits most if not all bank robbers, when Jimmy Ray yelled, "All right, you mother fuckers! Get down on the floor and do it now!"

A guard wheeled around, fumbling to get his pistol out of its holster, but to no avail. Jimmy Ray shot him on the spot. The guard dropped in pain, holding his side as the gun slid from his hand. I was thankful it didn't appear to be a mortal wound, but I don't think it mattered to Jimmy Ray. He was shooting to kill and just aimed a little wide. I could see a look of malicious glee in his eyes. He lived for moments like these, I realized. I was afraid he would finish off the guard just watch him die, but he didn't. I think he just didn't want to waste another bullet.

No one else crossed us. Everyone got to the floor as quickly as possible, many making loud plops as they threw themselves down before Jimmy Ray could fire at them. I could hear soft crying from a couple of the women, and a baby was crying out in fear.

Jimmy Ray vaulted over the teller line and grabbed a young teller up by her hair. She screamed in pain and fear, nearly crumbling to the floor again in sheer panic. "Listen, bitch!" Jimmy Ray growled in her ear. "You help him fill these bags with money." He pushed her head around so she could see me standing there with the bags. I tried to convey through my eyes a feeling of sympathy, but I think she was too frightened to realize it. I was just one murderous robber wearing a ski mask.

Trembling, she went from cash drawer to cash drawer, emptying the money and dropping it into the bag I held. I wasn't able to see how much cash she had collected, but I knew it had to be substantial.

"Get the drive-up window too, bitch!" Jimmy Ray yelled as he glanced furtively around the room to make sure no one tried to be a hero. "And if I find a paint bomb in that sack, I'm gonna waste you right now!"

The bag was getting very heavy by the time we were done. I glanced at the clock. We had been in the building for less than ten minutes — minutes which would spell ruin for the rest of my life. I stood there stupidly, the bag drooping from my hands like the Halloween bag of some tired child.

"Let's get out of here!" Jimmy Ray whispered to me with a sharp punch on my shoulder.

Together, we bolted out the door and piled into the waiting car. Enos slammed the car into gear and we screeched away from the curb at a speed greater than I would have thought possible from the old car.

"Head south!" Jimmy Ray ordered as he pulled himself up off me. We had both jumped into the back seat at almost the same moment, landing in a pile in the center of the seat.

Enos kept his eyes on the road while Jimmy Ray looked out the back window. "First farm road south of town, head east," he ordered.

Enos grunted in reply. At the first opportunity, he skidded into a left turn and we disappeared from the view of the main highway, shooting down a dusty gravel road at seventy.

“You see, Little Brother,” Jimmy Ray told me, “they’ll have seen us heading south. They’ll figure we were on our way straight down toward Oklahoma City, so they’ll cover all the roads in that direction. They’ll never figure us to go east until it’s too late.”

“Jimmy Ray, you’re a worthless bastard,” I murmured, practically in tears of fear and hatred.

Jimmy Ray laughed to my surprise. He held up the bag. “Worthless, Little Brother? Why, I ain’t worthless at all. I’d say there’s about a sixty to seventy grand in this here bag. That makes me worth a bunch!”

Enos chuckled, too. “Where we goin’ Jimmy Ray?”

“Bartlesville,” Jimmy Ray said. “We can hit another bank before noon. Then, we make it look like we’re goin’ on east, but we’ll head south. We’ll be in Texas in time for supper.”

And so I was introduced to a life of crime. I thought it couldn’t get any worse, but when we got to Bartlesville, I found out how wrong I could be. Bartlesville was maybe three times the size of Ark City. I figured it was maybe thirty thousand people or so. We got there by a quarter after eleven, and like most small Midwestern cities, it was doing a brisk Saturday business. The bank Jimmy Ray wanted to hit was right on the main street. He had Enos discretely park the car around the corner and wait. Then, he and I strolled casually to the main door of the bank where we put on our masks.

“Same rules, Bobby Joe,” my brother warned. “You fuck this up and I’ll blow you all over the lobby. You understand?”

I nodded that I did. I was convinced now that he meant it. He was one sadistic bastard. There was no way I would cross him and live.

“Then let’s go.”

The robbery was a replay of the one in Ark City, except this time, the guard had the good sense to drop to the floor with everyone else. In less than ten minutes, we were on our way, speeding out of town. Once safely away from Bartlesville, Jimmy Ray took over the driving chores while Enos napped in the back seat. I could see no pattern to

where he was going. It was as if he were compelled to go the directions he was going. He drove the old Dodge hard, heading first east and then south into the part of the state dotted with lakes, rolling hills, and small towns that all looked alike.

It was nearly one thirty when Enos roused himself in the back seat and mumbled, "Hey, Jimmy Ray, you gonna ever stop for lunch?"

"That's all you ever think about is that big gut of yours, Enos."

"Well, when we gonna stop?"

"It looks like there's a little town up ahead there," Jimmy Ray said. "We can stop and get gas there. Then we'll get you some lunch, Enos."

I wondered if this small town would be my opportunity to get away. Maybe if I could run out on them while they were eating or getting gas, I could make my way to the police. It was the only way I could think of that they might believe me. Otherwise, it was only a matter of time before I got caught with them. Then, no one would believe me.

The sign on the highway said 'Ovid - 2 Miles.'

"I ain't never heard of Ovid," Enos muttered, "and I was born and raised in Tulsa."

"Well, we can't expect a man of your culture and breeding to know the name of every little pissant town in the state, can we?" Jimmy Ray laughed. "How 'bout you, Little Brother? You ever hear of Ovid?"

"Only the poet; not the town," I replied.

"Poet?"

"Yeah," I told him. "He was a Roman poet. He lived about the time of Christ. He's the one who said 'the gods have their own rules'."

"So ain't you the educated boy? Tell me, Bobby Joe, what does that shit mean about the gods having their own rules? We're the ones that have our own rules. Fuck the gods." Jimmy Ray laughed again.

The rolling farmlands of Oklahoma gave way to the town of Ovid. The highway widened into four lanes as we came upon a strip of gas

stations and fast food restaurants.

“Not a fuckin’ McDonalds in sight,” Enos mumbled.

“Well, that’s okay, Enos,” Jimmy Ray laughed. “Since we got us a college boy for a partner, maybe we should be a little more high class and sample the local cuisine.”

His idea of local cuisine turned out to be a modest place with a neon sign out front that proclaimed ‘Rusty’s Best Burgers.’ We locked up the car. I kept thinking about the money in the trunk. There had to be over a hundred and fifty thousand dollars of stolen money in there, and here we were, loping into a burger joint as if we didn’t have a care in the world. I realized that beyond being a basically honest person, I could never rob banks for a living. I’d always be frightened and insecure, looking over my shoulder at every opportunity.

The place was clean, at least, and somebody had actually fed the jukebox, so we were to be serenaded with the sounds of Waylon Jennings while we ate. If this place couldn’t be a poster for Small Town America, I didn’t know what could. Jimmy Ray had me sit on the inside of a booth—I guess so I couldn’t make a run for it—and slid in beside me. Enos plopped down nonchalantly across from us.

The waitress was a chipper-looking blonde, the kind you would expect to have saunter up to the table, chewing gum, and say “Wat’cha guys havin’ today?” She broke the bimbo stereotype when she smiled a friendly smile and said brightly, “Hi! Welcome to Rusty’s. I’m Myra. Can I get you something to drink?”

On second appraisal, Myra looked far too bright to be a bimbo. She wore a white blouse with the name ‘Myra’ sewed on it, a short black skirt which showed off sensational legs, and black flats that had a lot of miles on them, and her hair was as blonde as any bimbo I had ever seen. But there was intelligence in her eyes. Behind the friendly smile, there was a calculating mind. She had sized us up as trash. I wanted desperately to tell her that I wasn’t like them, but I knew she’d never believe me. No one would.

“Yeah, honey,” Jimmy Ray said with a glance at the menu. “These

Rusty Burgers real good?”

“The best,” she replied.

“Okay, bring us a round of those—no onions on mine—and coffee all around.”

Apparently, I was not to be allowed even a choice of what I would eat when I was with Jimmy Ray. My brother hunched over the table and said in a loud voice, “What I’d really like is the sheepherder’s special. You know what that is, Little Brother?”

I shook my head, not really caring about the answer.

“It’s a glass of goat’s milk and a piece of the waitress.” He roared with laughter while Enos chuckled. I made no outward display, instead watching our waitress draw the coffee. From the red on her face, I was sure she had heard the joke. Surprisingly, the red looked to be more from anger than embarrassment. This Myra seemed pretty sharp.

“She too young for you, Jimmy Ray,” Enos mumbled. Yeah, I thought, and way too good for him, too.

“If they’re old enough to bleed, they’re old enough to butcher, Enos,” he laughed evilly. “You need to always remember that.”

Myra delivered the burgers and coffee quickly, agilely swerving to avoid Jimmy Ray’s lecherous butt pat.

The burgers were as advertised. I couldn’t remember the last time I had enjoyed a burger so much. So far, it was the only positive thing to happen to me on that day. And I don’t usually drink coffee in the afternoon, but the coffee was hot and flavourful—so much so that I gladly took a second cup. Myra poured us each an extra cup, again deftly gliding past Jimmy Ray before he could pinch her ass.

We were just finishing our coffee when Enos, facing the door, got very quiet. “Cop,” he muttered under his breath. Jimmy Ray casually reached up under his coat, ready to pull out his gun if the cop recognized us. I was determined that I wouldn’t let him shoot the cop, even if my brother shot me. Fortunately, that didn’t become necessary. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the cop saunter over to

the counter and take a stool. Myra smiled at him and poured him a cup of coffee.

We tried to be as casual as possible, leaving a nice tip for the girl. Jimmy Ray stood up at the counter and calmly paid the bill, but I noticed his hand never got very far away from his concealed weapon.

I actually got a good look at the cop. He looked professional, in his blue-gray shirt and blue trousers. I couldn't see his eyes, as he never removed his sunglasses, but just as I was getting ready to turn away, he turned toward me and, to my surprise, actually smiled. It wasn't just a friendly "Hi, how are you?" kind of smile. It was more of an ironic smile, as if to say "Next time." I smiled back, but inwardly, I shuddered.

"Why, this certainly is a friendly little town," Jimmy Ray said as we walked to the car. The sun was actually trying to come out, and the temperature was, if not warm, at least not terribly cold. "Let's go check this town out."

I had a bad feeling about this. "Come on, Jimmy Ray," I begged. "We've done enough damage for one day. Besides, it's Saturday afternoon. The banks are probably closed."

"Why, Little Brother, this is the nineties. Banks stay open longer. I wouldn't mind finding just one more before we head south. Sides, you worry too much. You're gonna like the family business just as soon as your balls grow a little bigger."

It wasn't hard to find the main business district. Like most small towns, all we had to do was follow the street we were on until we came to a traffic light. There was even a sign pointing to the business district. The Main Street of Ovid (yes, the main business street was really called Main Street) was bustling with activity, but as I looked around, I could see there was something not quite right. Jimmy Ray didn't seem to notice, but Enos did. "Spooks," he said.

"Why, Enos," Jimmy Ray laughed. "You ain't callin' yourself a spook, are you?"

Enos's face clouded. For the first time, I began to realize that Enos didn't really like Jimmy Ray. I had a feeling not too many people did. I knew I didn't.

"No," Enos said, "I mean look at some of those folks. They're like ghosts."

He was right. Some of the people looked perfectly normal, but the majority looked almost transparent. It wasn't like in the movies, where you can see things on the other side of a ghost. Rather, it was as if you could almost see through them, but not quite.

"You need more coffee," Jimmy Ray said. "You're seein' things. Keep your eye on us, though, 'cause I think I just spotted us a target." He nodded at a gray stucco building on the corner with a simple sign over the large brass and glass doors declaring it to be the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank.

"Saturday afternoon and the bank's still open," Jimmy Ray sighed. "Ain't the nineties wonderful, boys?"

Enos pulled up near the front of the building, but not right in front. A casual observer would have thought that he was waiting for someone to come out of the Radio shack next door, or out of the offices over the bank. He parked directly across next to a glass office door on which black letters had been freshly painted proclaiming it to house the Law Offices of Susan Jager.

Jimmy Ray handed me my mask and smiled. "It's gonna be just like the last two times," he told me. "I'll get their attention and you fill the bags. Then, we're off for Texas, Little Brother."

The bank lobby was a carbon copy of the last two we had visited that day. It was conservative and tasteful, but not as extravagant as city banks. Farmers and small town merchants never felt comfortable putting all their money in a bank that ostentatiously proclaimed wealth. They expected the bank and the bankers to be as goldarned Midwestern conservative as they were.

Being Saturday, many of the desks were empty, but the teller lines

were doing a brisk business. Three were busily accepting transactions while a fortyish, distinguished man in a suit chatted with a fourth teller. I didn't blame him. She looked to be early twenties and very attractive, although I noticed she had that almost-transparent look about her. She was certainly coming on to him. Several people in the bank were too busy watching the little soap opera to worry about us.

My appreciation of the teller was interrupted when Jimmy Ray yelled out, "All right! Everybody down on the floor now!"

Again, there was momentary confusion, but in seconds, all of the customers and employees of the bank had dived for the floor. Again, the earlier scene was repeated. Jimmy Ray strode over to the attractive teller, yanked her to her feet, and ordered her to fill the sacks I was carrying. Up until then, everything had been working right for my brother, but as the last of the money was stuffed in my bags, we heard a shot outside and the squeal of tires.

Jimmy Ray looked out the main window of the bank in time to see his old white Dodge fishtailing away from the curb and down the street. "What the fuck?" he yelled.

"Drop the gun!" a voice demanded. Jimmy Ray and I looked in the direction of the voice, near the main door of the bank. Standing there, gun at the ready, was the same cop I had seen at the burger joint. Had he followed us? He must have, or he would never have zeroed in on us so quickly. It looked as if my life of crime was going to be much shorter than even I had suspected.

I could see from his eyes that Jimmy Ray didn't plan to give up. Even with his car gone and a presumably trained law officer holding a gun on him, he still thought he had a chance. I didn't think so, though. I dropped the bags and raised my hands.

When I yelled, "Jimmy Ray no!" my words were cut off by three quick gunshots. He fired point blank at the officer, but somehow, he missed. I thought for a moment that I could see the officer actually move out of the way of the bullets. It was like one of those subliminal studies you participate in during a psychology lab where a single frame is placed

in the middle of a scene. In that single frame, the officer seemed to dodge out of the way of the oncoming bullets.

Jimmy Ray couldn't believe it either, but as he prepared to fire again, one well-placed bullet fired from the officer's gun struck Jimmy Ray's gun, sending it flying in a wide arc across the room. It was the first time since I had hooked up with my brother that I found him at a loss for words. He slowly raised his hands, completely dumbstruck.

The officer led us out to his cruiser, parked almost directly behind the spot where our car had been parked. Enos must have seen the cruiser come up behind him and hauled ass before the officer could get the drop on him. No, that didn't sound quite right. If the cop had wanted Enos, he was fast enough to stop him. It was us that he wanted. Enos could wait.

"Dumb jig," Jimmy Ray muttered under his breath as we were pushed into the caged back seat. "Wait 'til I get my hands on that nigger."

"Yeah," I returned. "In about twenty years."

"Jails can't hold me," Jimmy Ray told me as we pulled away from the curb. "That's the difference between me and Daddy. He let hisself get caught. Me? I got away."

Not this time, I thought to myself. It would be a couple of days, though, before I realized how prophetic I had been.

We were ushered into adjoining cells in what had to be the strangest jail I could ever imagine. The only police officer I saw was the one who had captured us. There was no one at the front desk, and no one in the halls or offices. I knew this Ovid was a small town, but surely it had more than one officer working at any given time.

"I'm Officer Mercer," the policeman said when we had been safely locked in our cells. "The Judge will see you both first thing Monday morning. Until then, if you need anything, you can talk to me."

"I want a lawyer!" Jimmy Ray snapped.

"You'll have appropriate legal counsel when the Judge thinks it's necessary," Officer Mercer said crisply.

“What the hell are you talkin’ about?” Jimmy Ray exploded. “That’s un-American. You gotta read us our rights and get us a lawyer if we demand it. I’m demanding it!”

Officer Mercer merely smiled and walked away.

“I’ll be outta this two-bit jail so fast it’ll make your fuckin’ head spin!” Jimmy Ray yelled at the departing officer, who appeared not to notice.

Jimmy Ray chuckled, “These local yokels don’t have no idea what they’re doin’. They didn’t read us our rights or nothin’. I’ll tell you, Bobby Joe, this Officer Mercer is gonna look plumb stupid when this judge has to let us go on procedure.”

I was sure Jimmy Ray knew what the proper procedure would be, but as I sank back onto the clean bunk in my dimly-lit cell, I thought to myself that procedure in Ovid might be very different. I was soon to find out how right I was.

Jimmy Ray finally stopped his ranting and raving, so the rest of the day went quietly. Officer Mercer even provided me with a few magazines to pass the time. I wasn’t happy to be in a jail cell, but anything was better than being an unwilling participant in a crime spree with my psychopathic brother. I was just thankful no one had been killed in our little crime spree, including me. I had had visions of the last scenes in Bonnie and Clyde where their bullet-ridden bodies jumped in slow motion as round after round was poured into them.

I wasn’t looking forward to jail time, though. This had been my only experience in a cell, and although the room was clean and the bed actually more comfortable than I expected, I still lived with the knowledge that if I went to the steel-barred door and pushed with all my might, nothing would happen. I was going nowhere, except to another cell. Midwestern states are the home office of law and order. I could expect no mercy from the courts. Jimmy Ray and I would probably serve the same long sentence, in spite of the fact that I was a neophyte at the armed robbery business and Jimmy Ray had been doing it for his entire adult life.

I had had a decent life to look forward to, but now, I had nothing. No one would believe me when I told them I had nothing to do with the robberies. How could I make them understand that I was as much a victim as the people lying on the floor in the banks we had robbed? I would just have to do what I could. I would tell the truth and hope for a miracle.

After a surprisingly good dinner of roast beef and potatoes and a little more reading on my bunk, I fell asleep. I dreamed of the past; I dreamed of my mother. She had been a wonderful woman, deserving of more than the hard life she had. How had she linked up with my father? I had never really known, and the dream did nothing to tell me. In the dream, my mother was back at her old job at the coffee shop. She was wearing that terrible pink waitress dress seen in half the coffee shops in the country. I was there, too, on one of the stools, drinking coffee and watching her work. She looked tired, almost worn out.

Then, I looked down at my coffee cup as she poured me another cup. I watched as the dark brown liquid cascaded down into my cup, swirling as it hit. It seemed to be moving in slow motion, as if the cup would never fill. Then, I realized suddenly that I was the one pouring the coffee. I was pouring it for someone else who was sitting at the stool where I had been. I had seen him before, but I couldn't remember where. He was about forty or so, balding slightly along the front, his hair a mixture of brown and gray. He was wearing a dark gray suit. Where had I seen him before? Then I remembered. He was at the bank. He was the one talking with the attractive teller.

He looked up and smiled. "Thanks," he said, then looked back at his coffee.

I turned and looked in the mirror, but all I could see was my mother's reflection looking back at me in shock, and...

"Seven o'clock. Time to get up."

"What?" I mumbled, stirring in my bunk. Where was I? I wondered. Then I remembered. I was in jail.

“What do you hafta do to get a cup of coffee around this shithole?” Jimmy Ray yelled from the next cell.

“Watching your mouth would be a good start,” the cop said. I realized it was the same officer who had arrested us. Didn’t he ever sleep?

Individually, we were led to take a shower and given fresh clothes, if orange prison coveralls could be called clothes. When we got back to our cells, breakfast was waiting for us. Again, the food was surprisingly good, consisting of orange juice, steak and eggs, and coffee. I really hadn’t eaten this well as a student. The Ovid Police department must have an incredible budget, I thought.

It was nearly noon when I was interrupted again. I had thought my lunch was about to be delivered, but Officer Mercer was empty handed. “Your lawyer is here to see you,” he told me.

I was puzzled. I hadn’t called a lawyer. I wouldn’t even know who to call.

“Where’s my lawyer?” Jimmy Ray demanded from the next cell. Had I detected a note of concern from him? It did seem odd that the lawyer had come only to see me. What did that mean?

“It’s been taken care of,” Officer Mercer told him.

I was led to a small, Spartan conference room where a very attractive woman was waiting for me. She had long brown hair and wore a beige silk blouse and a camel skirt which, as she rose to meet me, I could see was quite short, displaying a fantastic pair of legs. I was in love. She straightened her glasses and offered her hand. “Susan Hen... er, Jager.”

She wore, I could see, a sparkling new wedding ring. That explained her confusion over her own name, I was sure. I offered my own hand, surprised to find her grip was strong like a man’s. Most women I had known offered only a limp hand, as if I was supposed to take it to my lips and kiss it gently. I found myself liking Susan Jager at once.

“Now,” she began once we were seated, “what’s your side of the story?”

“The story?”

She sighed, “Mr. Malone, you and your brother have been charged with three counts of armed robbery. If we’re lucky, I might be able to get you less than twenty years, but I don’t know. Your brother tried to use an Ovid police officer for target practice, so it won’t be easy.”

“Is that why you’re not representing him?” I asked. “Is he being brought up on additional charges?”

She looked at me very seriously. “Your brother robbed a bank in Fremont, Nebraska, three months ago, killing a teller who tried to press the alarm. A week later, he was involved in a robbery in Pueblo, Colorado, where he murdered a bank customer. It appears that he told everybody to get down on the floor, but a customer who was deaf didn’t understand. Your brother shot him in the back.”

I was sick. I knew my brother was a bad apple, but I had no idea he was the man he was. Man? No, he didn’t even deserve to be called a man. He was a monster. I had seen it in his eyes. He wanted someone to challenge him, just so he could watch them die. He even wanted me to challenge him, and I had no doubt that if I had, he would have shot me where I stood.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Not really,” I replied. “I just... didn’t realize... I mean, he’s my brother.”

She patted my hand. “Look, Mr. Malone, the Judge knows you didn’t have anything to do with the murders. If you had, we wouldn’t be talking now. You’d be... Well, let’s just say you’d be facing a different fate.”

“So what happens now?” I asked.

“You’ll be taken into court tomorrow,” she told me.

“For arraignment?”

“Yes, and trial.” She noticed the shocked expression on my face.

“Justice is swift in Ovid. You’ll be tried and sentenced tomorrow.

That's what makes this meeting so important. I have to see the Judge first thing in the morning if we're going to have any chance."

I told her everything I could think of. I knew I was fighting for my freedom. Who would believe a bank robber? I had been caught red-handed, and now I was going to be the recipient of justice that seemed to come out of an old western movie. 'Come on, boys, let's take him down to the judge for a fair trial and then hang him! Drinks are on me!' I shuddered at the thought.

"What do you think?" I asked my attorney after I had told her the entire story.

"I think we have a case, but I'm not sure what the results will be. Justice is a little different in Ovid. Sometimes, it isn't what you've done that gets you in trouble, but rather what you haven't done."

I scowled. "I don't think I understand."

She gave a slight smile. "You will."

I was taken back to my cell after that. Jimmy Ray was leaning into the bars, obviously anxious to talk to me. "So you saw the lawyer, Little Brother. What did he say?"

"First of all, he was a she," I told him, "and she told me you're a murderer."

Jimmy Ray actually laughed. "You don't really believe that, do you Bobby Joe?"

"Yes, I do."

He was silent for a moment. Then, he said, "Bobby Joe, robbin' banks is a dangerous business. Sometimes, people get in your way."

"Like a deaf man who didn't know he was even in danger?"

"So? It happens, Little Brother. I started robbin' banks when I was fourteen. Then, it was Daddy and me. In all that time, I only had to shoot three people. Now, that ain't bad."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My own brother was justifying

murder, and he actually believed he could make me understand. I couldn't. I never would. He had taken the lives of two innocent people, and now he was taking my life, just in a different way. Yet he still thought I would understand what he had done. There were actually tears in my eyes, but they were tears of anger.

"So what did the lawyer say, Little Brother?"

"Go to hell, Jimmy Ray."

To my relief, he said nothing. Me? I just slumped down on my bunk, feeling sorry for myself. I was too upset to eat lunch, and I just picked at my dinner. I went to bed early but didn't sleep well, worrying about my trial. Finally, I fell asleep and dreamed of my mother again, only this time, I was at her funeral. The service was apparently over, and I was standing before her casket, the only mourner.

Given my dream of the night before, I wouldn't have been surprised to suddenly find myself in the casket looking up. But that didn't happen. Instead, as I watched my mother at the start of her eternal sleep, her eyes suddenly opened wide. They searched the room, falling upon me. I wanted to run, but my feet refused to move. My mother was looking at me with tears in her eyes. Her lips formed words, but I couldn't quite hear them. Then, as I leaned down to hear her, a cold arm rested on my shoulder, and I heard my mother's voice saying, "Don't let it happen to you."

I was suddenly awake. It was morning—the morning of our trial. Today, I might be sentenced to many years behind bars. I was the accomplice of a hardened criminal—a murderer, no less. I hoped for some mercy, but I expected little.

We were given new clothes for our court appearance, consisting of white shirts, gray trousers, and black loafers. At least it felt good to be out of the jail coveralls, but I suspected it would be my last time in street clothes for many years.

The courtroom was at the opposite end of the long hall leading from the jail. Handcuffed and shackled, Officer Mercer led us past the city employees, bustling through their Monday morning. There was the

smell of coffee in the air, and the sounds of conversation and even laughter. I longed to be one of them, living a boring life in a small town. I would have even been one of the transparent people, whoever or whatever they were. I would have been anyone right then, except myself and my brother.

Jimmy Ray affected a casual swagger, as if he didn't have a care in the world. There was even a grin on his face. I wondered if he had managed to 'beat the rap' before, and how he planned to do so having been caught with his hand in the cookie jar, as it were.

The courtroom was far nicer than I would have expected in a small town. It looked very much like the pictures I had seen of larger courtrooms in the big cities. Expensive wood panelling was in evidence, and everything from the carpet to the paint on the walls looked fresh and new.

Susan Jager was waiting for me. She looked to be the picture of the professional attorney in her navy blue suit, white silk blouse, and two-inch black patent heels. I fell in love with her all over again. She put on her glasses and motioned me to sit next to her. Jimmy Ray started to slide in on the other side of her, but Officer Mercer grabbed him and pulled him before the bench.

"Hey! Where's my lawyer?" Jimmy Ray whined.

"Quiet!" Officer Mercer snapped.

Jimmy Ray looked frightened, probably for one of the few times in his life. He slouched down and said nothing.

Officer Mercer then called for all to rise. That didn't take long. The only spectator in the gallery was a very attractive blonde woman in a lavender suit. I had no idea what she was doing there. Maybe she was a reporter for the local newspaper, or maybe she just had nothing better to do.

The Judge was an impressive figure. He was, perhaps, fifty with hair that was mostly dark with just a hint of gray. Even from where I stood, I could see his gold rimmed glasses were expensive. He was tall,

certainly over six feet, and walked with the confidence of a man who knows what he is doing.

“First case is the people of Ovid versus James Ray Malone.”

“Very well,” the Judge said in a deep voice. “How do you plead?”

Jimmy Ray’s look of nonchalant confidence changed to one of confusion. “How do I plead? Ain’t you supposed to read all the charges? And where’s my lawyer?”

The Judge sighed. “In the first place, reading all of the charges would be a waste of time. There are simply too many to mention, starting with killing that little girl’s cat back when you were thirteen.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Jimmy Ray ordered defiantly. “How did you know?... I mean, you don’t have any proof about that.”

“You want proof?” the Judge thundered. “Your presence in this courtroom is all the proof I need. You see, I know you, Jimmy Ray. I know you better than you know yourself. I know you are a thief, a bully, and a murderer, and I only wish it were within the power of this court to bring back your victims. from the dead. I know that what beats in your breast isn’t a human heart. You don’t deserve to even resemble a human. Now, it’s time for your sentence.”

What kind of a trial was this? I wondered. There was no prosecutor, unless you considered the Judge to be one, and no defense attorney, as the only lawyer in the room was Susan Jager who sat wordlessly beside me. There was an atmosphere in the room that was building by the minute. It was an atmosphere of something out of phase, as if reality were being swept down the drain, replaced by something else.

I looked at my brother. Gone were the swagger and the self-confidence. Except for his face, he seemed unable to move. His face had contorted into a mask of fear. Perhaps for the first time in his life, he really had something to be afraid of, and that something was an unlikely middle-aged Judge who, perched on his bench in starched black robes, seemed to be imbued with an unearthly power.

“You have forfeited the right to be human,” the Judge decreed,

following this with something which sounded like Latin, but not like the Latin I had heard in school. This Latin had the sound and inflections of a living tongue, as if the way we had pronounced it for years was nothing but a pale imitation of the true sound of the language.

“Do you know the difference between a steer and a bull, Jimmy Ray?” the Judge asked.

Jimmy Ray managed to shake his head in fear.

“Of course you don’t. You were raised on the streets of cities,” the Judge commented. “I was raised in a more agrarian world, and I know the difference well. You see, Jimmy Ray, a bull is a male bovine, capable of reproducing his own kind. Dull and uncaring, he serves a purpose, but there can be few bulls in a herd. They are too possessive, too unfriendly to other bulls. So ranchers castrate many of them when they’re young. These are what we have come to call steers.”

The cloying air was pierced with an inhuman scream from my brother as he doubled over, clutching at his groin in pain.

The Judge continued his lecture. “In this way, they are useful for only one thing. They are raised to maturity where they are taken to the slaughterhouse. The men there who kill and butcher them, have no more concern for the lives of the steers than you did for your victims, Jimmy Ray.”

My brother’s body was beginning to warp in ways the human body was never designed to be. He fell to the floor, trying to stand, but unable to balance on his legs. As his clothing disintegrated, I could see that his legs were no longer human. Instead, the joint had been reversed, and his feet were merging into a solid mass. Similar changes were occurring to his hands, and his entire body was sprouting short, wiry black hair.

“Do you remember the other day, Jimmy Ray, when you said ‘if they’re old enough to bleed, they’re old enough to butcher’? A prophetic statement, I must say,” the Judge laughed.

How could he have known that? Jimmy Ray had said that to us after we had admired the young waitress in the restaurant.

Officer Mercer slipped a rope around Jimmy Ray's thickening neck. He left it loose enough that it wouldn't choke him in his changing state. My brother already looked more bovine than human.

"Enjoy the rest of your short life, Jimmy Ray," the Judge said. "Think of this as if more traditional justice had sentenced you. You would be sentenced to die, and after years of appeal, they would eventually execute you. You just wouldn't know when. The same is true for you now. You will be a steer, munching grass and dreaming of satisfying heifers you can never have. Then, one day, you'll be led to a truck and taken to the slaughterhouse. But there will be no last-minute call from the governor to commute your sentence. All this you will know and continue to know until the end, but you will be able to do nothing about it, for you are a steer, and you will act like a steer until the slaughterhouse ends your life as thoughtlessly as you ended the lives of your victims."

The thing that had been my brother let out a plaintive wail that was not quite bovine, but was certainly not human. With a jerk of the rope, he was led from the room, walking as best he could on newly formed legs. A tail was pushing its way out as he left, growing steadily longer and beginning to swish. It was the last I ever saw of Jimmy Ray.

"And now, it is your turn, Mr. Robert Joseph Malone," the Judge intoned.

Was this to be my fate as well? My attorney rose, gently pulling me to my feet as well. I was afraid I would not be able to stand, but somehow, I managed.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Mr. Malone?" the Judge asked, his voice still intimidating. I tried to speak, but nothing came out.

"What's the matter, Mr. Malone? Don't you want to tell us about how you had no part in these robberies. Don't you want us to know that you knew nothing of your brother's murderous past? Don't you want us to believe that you are just an innocent victim of your brother's

nefarious schemes?”

Yes, I did, but I couldn't speak. No supernatural agency was preventing me from speaking; I was simply frightened. I knew in my heart that I would never be allowed to return to the life I had known. The only question was what shape my life would now take. Was I to become a steer like my brother, condemned to a short, meaningless life? Or would my sentence be lessened by mitigating circumstances, perhaps allowing me to be—what?

“Your Honor,” my attorney was saying, “I would like to point out to the court that my client has no record of previous arrests. There is sufficient reason to believe that he may have been an unwilling participant in these activities.”

“I suspect you are correct,” the Judge said calmly, much to my surprise, “but the Court must examine the consequences of these unwilling activities.” He turned to me and asked in a calm, almost friendly manner, “Mr. Malone, if you had not been apprehended on Saturday, what would have been your fate?”

What an odd question, I thought, but I managed to reply, “I'm not sure, Your Honor, but I prefer to think that I would have managed to get away from my brother.”

“But you had opportunities to get away on Saturday and didn't take them,” he pointed out. “I doubt of he would have shot you down when you stopped for lunch. In fact, the only place you were probably in any danger of being shot by your brother was during the actual robberies, wouldn't you agree?”

I didn't want to agree, but he was probably right. Jimmy Ray was too sly to bother to shoot me in a place where he couldn't make a clean getaway. In the restaurant, if I had made a move to get away, I could have gotten help from the police officer. But I hadn't. Now, I stood accused of the crime of indecision as well as that of robbery.

“I have heard your attorney speak on your behalf. She has presented valid arguments for mitigating circumstances,” the Judge said more gently.

My heart skipped in the hope of a dismissal, or at least a light sentence, but then, the Judge continued, "In light of these arguments, I sentence you to a loss of fifteen years. Sentence is to be carried out at once. Officer Mercer, you will escort the prisoner to the appropriate place where the sentence will be administered."

"Yes, Your Honor."

I looked at my attorney. "That's it? I have to do fifteen years in prison? Isn't there any way to appeal?"

Ms. Jager shook her head. "We can talk about it some time when you're settled in."

"Settled in? Where are they taking me?"

My questions went unanswered. As the Judge's gavel rapped the adjournment of court, I was led by the iron grip of Officer Mercer out of the courtroom. No one would say a word to me. I suppose I should have felt grateful. I had seen the strange magic the Judge could perform. I could have been on a truck with my brother, facing a short life as beef on the hoof. Fifteen years in jail was certainly more preferable, if somewhat more mundane than I had expected.

I was led out of the building to Officer's Mercer's waiting patrol car. As I was pushed gently into the back seat, I fully expected to be driven immediately to a prison. At least, I was still human. What possible agency could change my brother from a human to a steer? It was beyond anything I had ever imagined. It was... magic. There could be no other word for it. I was majoring in biology, and I knew what it would take to change a human into another creature. It was beyond the realm of any scientific process that could even be imagined. Yet, it had been done. Perhaps, I thought, consoling myself, my sentence to prison was not so bad after all.

As Officer Mercer pulled out of the parking lot and onto the streets of Ovid, I began to realize that I was not feeling well. At first, I thought it was just the aftershock of my brother's transformation and my sentence, but then, I began to realize it was more than that. Every part of my body seemed to be undergoing minor spasms, as if it was

undulating like molded Jell-O. I lifted a hand to my face with difficulty. It was as if my limbs would no longer obey my commands. Was I having a stroke, brought on by the intense pressures of the last few days?

To take my mind off the spasms, I looked out the window of the car. We were travelling through a residential part of town with very nice middle-class houses. Surely this was not the way to the prison. Prisons are never built in pleasant residential areas, and the street did not look like a main thoroughfare leading to another part of town. In fact, the street got narrower, more like a country lane, and the houses became even larger and more opulent.

At last, we came to a halt in the half-circle driveway of one of the largest houses. It was a white two-story, with columns in front. Although a fairly new home, it had obviously been designed to remind one of the days of Southern plantation homes. If this was to be my prison, I thought with an ironic smile, the Oklahoma Department of Corrections was given too much money.

Officer Mercer opened the car door, allowing fresh, cool air to wash over my face. "I don't think I can stand," I told him, trying without success to pull myself out of the car.

"I'll help you," he replied, gently taking my arm. It was as if a sudden burst of energy coursed through my system, and I was on my feet, albeit unsteadily, in moments. He escorted me up the stairs to the large double doors. He then pushed open the door, which I was surprised to see was unlocked, and led me into the house.

If the exterior of the house had been impressive, the interior was even more so. Everything about the house, from the carpets and drapes to the ceramic figures on walnut tables, spoke of money, and not just new money, but generations of money.

Officer Mercer led me to a large, circular staircase. I shook my head, though, and said in a voice which cracked oddly, "I don't think I can make it up the stairs."

"Yes, you can," he said confidently. "Here, let me help you."

To my surprise, he put his arm around my waist, much as he might have with a woman. Again, I felt a small burst of energy course through me, and with his help, negotiated the stairs. He led me to a bedroom which was larger than my entire apartment. With the last of my strength, I fell onto the large king-sized bed with a sigh. Officer Mercer carefully straightened me out on the bed, until my head rested on a large, fluffy pillow.

“You’ll feel better in a little while,” he predicted with the first smile I had seen him give since the restaurant. I didn’t reply, though, for my eyes closed and the world became dark.

I awoke to the sound of a slamming door. As the sleepiness retreated, I felt... different. There was a tickling sensation at the sides of my jaws, extending down to my neck, and I felt a strange weight on my chest. Slowly, I opened my eyes. In what I was to discover was late afternoon light, I looked down at myself. Two large mounds stood like symmetrical hills on my chest. I knew at once what they were. I gasped, hearing a higher pitched voice than I was used to. I pushed myself upright and saw the rest of my body. I was wearing a pale blue dress of some silky material, and my breasts as gravity pulled on them looked even bigger than they had when I was lying down. I looked below the dress. From the bottom of the knee-length skirt, two well-proportioned, slim legs covered in nylon dangled, barely touching the floor.

I raised my hands and stared at them. My hands were small and patrician, with long graceful fingers ending in long shaped nails painted a delicate pink. As if this wasn’t bad enough, there was a wedding ring with a large brilliant diamond on my left hand.

I jumped to my feet and rushed to a full-length mirror, feeling the odd sensation of my breasts swaying inside the cups of my new bra. I stared into the mirror, and an attractive older woman looked back at me. She—I—was perhaps forty, with medium length dark blonde hair, laced here and there with a silver strand of hair. My face was attractive, the makeup subtle, with just a hint of crow’s feet at the corners of my hazel eyes. I was well built, and I realized that as a

younger woman, I would have turned heads. Unlike many women of forty, I had kept my figure, it appeared. I looked to be about five six or so.

There was a purse on the bed. I walked over to it and withdrew a wallet from it. There it was, my driver's license. I looked at it, seeing my new face smiling back at me in a reasonably decent photo. My name was Rachel Tilton, and I was not forty, but only thirty-seven. I thanked god for the three years. It was better to lose fifteen years than eighteen.

Lose fifteen years—where had I heard that before? Then I remembered. The Judge had sentenced me not to fifteen years in prison, I realized, but rather to the loss of fifteen years. He had taken away my youth as surely as a prison sentence would have done. He had not only changed my sex, but my generation as well. I was practically as old as my mother would have been if she had lived. I shuddered at the sudden realization that I was now the age she had been at her death.

I grew up listening to Depeche Mode and Smashing Pumpkins. Now, I was part of a generation that had grown up with ELO and Steely Dan. I was a Baby Boomer. Instead of growing up with Mad About You and Seinfeld, I belonged to a generation that had been weaned on shows now seen only on Nickelodeon. It was ironic. If I had been turned into a girl my original age, I might have been able to cope, but now, how could I pass myself off as an older woman? I simply lacked the experience.

My wallowing in self-pity was interrupted by a sudden knock on my door. "Are you all right?" It was a girl's voice, young and sweet. I didn't really know how to answer her. Was I all right? Hell no, I wasn't. I was supposed to be a man. I had done nothing to deserve this fate. Even fifteen years in jail didn't seem so bad to me now as long as I had those fifteen years to live and kept my penis as well. On the other hand, if I lived in this house—and I assumed that I did—I was very well off. I might be a woman, but I was apparently a very well-to-do one.

The door opened. I turned and saw a young girl of thirteen or fourteen

staring at me. She looked like a younger version of the woman I had become, perhaps three inches shorter than my new height, her hair short to mid length and blonde surrounding an angelic face. She wore only a minimum of makeup, but she didn't need much. Even the ragged jeans and the red and white University of Oklahoma sweatshirt she wore could do little to disguise the fact that she was a beautiful young girl well on her way to becoming an even more beautiful young lady.

She looked at me, eyes wide, and blurted, "You're real!"

"I suppose I am," I replied with a sigh, then added, "whatever real is."

"Do you..." she began hesitantly. "Do you remember who you were?"

Anywhere else but Ovid, it would have been an odd question, but here, I knew what she meant. "Yes," I responded with trepidation. Was everyone in Ovid originally someone or something else?

The girl sat down on the bed. "Well isn't this a kick in the ass?" she muttered to herself, quite out of character for a young girl, I thought.

"What's going on here?" I asked, sitting on the bed next to her.

"Well, for starters, you're my mother," she responded with a sly grin.

"Of course, you know you're not my mother. That's better than the shade who was my mother before. She thought she was really my mother. That was a pain in the ass, I can tell you."

"Shade? What's a shade?" I asked.

"The people you can sort of see through," she replied.

So that was what Enos had called ghosts just a couple of days before.

"But what are shades? I mean, where do they come from?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? They're sort of like zeroes in a big number. They're just placeholders until you put a real number in their place."

"That's pretty good math for —what?—a thirteen-year-old?" I observed.

“Please,” she said sarcastically, “I’m no more a thirteen-year-old girl than you are my thirty-seven-year-old mother. And besides, I’m fourteen and a freshman in high school. At least that’s what I am now. Before, I was majoring in education in college with plans to be a high school football coach and math teacher. So much for that idea, huh?”

“But how can this be happening to me?” I wanted to know.

“The question should be how can this be happening to us? You know the answer to that. You’ve already been introduced to the Judge.” It wasn’t a question. Apparently she had met the Judge well before I had.

“So how can the Judge do this to me—us?” I asked. “How can he have magic powers? This isn’t possible.”

She stood up and pulled me to my feet, leading me to the mirror. “Just take a look at yourself, sweetheart, and tell me again how this is impossible. You know damned good and well that it’s possible. Oh, you’ll wake up a morning or two and hope before you open your eyes that it was all just some weird nightmare brought on by too much pizza and beer, but then, you’ll open your eyes and see those breasts in front of you and look down to see what’s missing between your legs and you’ll know it wasn’t just a dream.

“As to your questions about the Judge, you’ll have to figure out that for yourself. The Judge doesn’t like his real identity discussed by anyone. I can’t tell you any more than that. It won’t take you very long to figure it out.”

“All right,” I agreed. I suppose it didn’t really matter for the moment anyhow. “So I assume you’re supposed to be my daughter?”

She actually smiled at me. “Hey, I like that. ‘Supposed to be.’ That fits. Yeah, you’re supposed to be my mother. In this little fantasy world the Judge has cooked up, I’m Jennifer Tilton, only child of Charles and Rachel Tilton, one of Ovid’s finest old families. But I remember who I really was, even if the poor person who became Charles Tilton doesn’t remember a thing of his past life. It’s been enough to drive me crazy, with that shade of a mother and my clueless imitation father constantly

wringing their hands and demanding that their dear little daughter be more feminine.”

“I assume you don’t want to be more feminine,” I commented, sitting once more on the bed.

“Of course not,” she said, hands on her hips. “Before Ovid, I wasn’t even a girl. I was twenty-one and about to graduate from college. I played football for Northwest Missouri State. I was a starting tackle for the team, so you can imagine my size as a male. Then, our plane got forced down in Ovid a little over a year ago last fall. The next thing all of us knew, we were changed into other people. I really got the short straw, though.”

“How do you figure?”

She looked at me, startled. “What do you mean? Haven’t you been listening. I was a man.”

“So was I,” I countered.

“And you don’t mind being a female?” she asked derisively. “What were you—a fruit?”

I felt my face turn red. “No, I wasn’t a fruit. I was completely heterosexual. What I meant was that you’re healthy, attractive, well off, and young. You actually gained a few extra years to live,” I said, feeling the bitterness creep into my voice. “I got the same dose you got, only I’m fifteen years older than before.”

“How about that,” she muttered softly. “That means you and I must have been about the same age before Ovid. Were you in college, too?”

“Wichita State,” I replied.

“We were supposed to play you in football sometime.”

“Next year, I think,” I agreed.

“Isn’t that weird?” she said, shaking her head. “We both go from college guys to cunts in the wink of an eye.”

I winced at the word 'cunt.' I had never liked the term; I had more respect for women than to use the word loosely. Also, I didn't like the fact that I now had one of my very own.

"What's the matter?" she asked, seeing my displeasure.

"I don't like to think of myself as a cunt," I told her.

"But that's what you are," she countered. Then, her shoulders sagging, added, "and so am I."

"Wait a minute. When you were a guy, did you call yourself a dick?" I asked.

She looked a little startled. "Of course not! If a guy is a dick, he's... he's..."

"Something of an asshole," I finished for her with a laugh.

She grinned in response. "Well... yes."

"So why should you consider yourself a cunt?" I asked seriously.

She was silent, but I could see she had never stopped to consider this line of reasoning before. I broke the silence for her.

"Look, I'm going to need your help. You've been here for more than a year. I guess that means you're stuck being Jennifer forever and I'm stuck being Rachel and your mother. Why don't we try to help each other?"

"How?"

I sighed. Jennifer had been so busy being angry for the past year that she had never considered the positive side of things. I would have given anything to take her place. True, I would have still been a girl, but I thought I could have coped with that in exchange for having my teen years over again as the privileged offspring of a wealthy family instead of the underprivileged son of a woman who was killing herself just trying to keep her family fed. For that matter, there were probably others in Ovid who would have gladly exchanged the life the Judge had given them for Jennifer's life. I couldn't tell her that, though. She was too bitter to accept the truth.

“Well,” I began, choosing my words carefully, “I think you can help me to understand who Rachel Tilton really is. You can help me fit in. You’ll have to help me be a woman. I mean, I don’t know the first thing about being female.”

She studied me for a moment before asking a little defiantly, “Okay, if I do that, what’s in it for me?”

“A fair question,” I replied. “I gather you haven’t gotten along very well with your shade mother.”

She snorted, “That’s an understatement. She was nothing but an aging bimbo.”

I felt an uncomfortable turn in my stomach as I visualized what that must have meant. I don’t know which bothered me more—the bimbo part or the aging part.

“She wanted me to be the same way she was when she was my age,” Jennifer went on. “She wanted me to wear dresses and more makeup and defer to all the boys. She even tried to pick out the right sort of boy for me. Do you know who she picked?”

“She picked Chester Thurman! Can you imagine? No, I know you can’t. Chester is really Chester Martin Thurman the Fourth, son of Ovid’s richest man. And he’s an idiot! He thinks he’s... he’s god’s gift to women. He thinks a girl should just fall down on her knees in front of him and suck on his dick! I can’t stand him!”

“What does he think about you?” I asked.

“Think about me? I don’t think he ever thinks about anyone but himself. Barry says it’s a good thing he’s just a shade or...”

“Wait a minute!” I pleaded. “You’re going too fast! Who is Barry?”

“Barry is one of the guys I played football with before Ovid. He’s one of the lucky ones.”

“Lucky? How?” I prompted.

“Well, for starters, he’s still a guy. Even though his dad is just an assembly worker out at Vulman Industries, he got to be a guy instead

of a little Miss Rich Bitch like me. And, he remembers who he was.”

“Doesn’t everybody?”

“Nope,” she said. “Maybe one in four or five people remember who they were. Charles Tilton, your husband, is one of the ones who doesn’t have a clue who he was before. I don’t know either. I just came home one night and he was real, but he acted just like the shade he replaced.”

“So what’s he like?” I wanted to know.

“Wait a minute. I asked what was in it for me, and the next thing I know, I’m giving you all of this for free.”

“Okay,” I sighed, “here’s the way I see it. You’ve been changed into a thirteen-year-old girl, and you...”

“Fourteen.”

“Okay, a fourteen-year-old girl. Anyhow, that means your parents still pretty much have control of your life, especially in a small town like Ovid. Am I right so far?”

She nodded carefully.

“So,” I concluded, “I can make life a lot easier for you. I mean, we were both young men and now we’re women, so we should be natural allies. I don’t want to be a bimbo, aging or otherwise, and I’m not going to turn you into one either.”

“That sounds fair,” she agreed, sitting beside me on the bed again. “I just see one problem in all of this.”

“What’s that?”

“Well,” she began slowly, “I think you should know, Charles may be about ready to break up this happy home of yours.”

I felt that sinking feeling again. “What do you mean?”

“You two aren’t exactly on the best of terms. Rachel has her own life of women’s groups and too much wine at dinner, and Charles has his work and probably has a girl friend. You two don’t even sleep together

anymore.”

“We don’t?”

She shrugged again. “It’s a big house. He took one of the other bedrooms last fall.”

I wasn’t anxious to play the dutiful wife, fulfilling my husband’s every sexual fantasy, but I wasn’t ready to play the aging, drunken jilted wife either. I had watched my own father leave my mother, and although Mom and I were glad to see him go, there were many difficulties as a result.

“If there’s a breakup, who would get custody of you?” I asked cautiously.

“Well, Charles has all the money and all the power. He’s got the sharpest lawyer in Ovid, he plays golf with the Judge, and he thinks he loves his dear little daughter, so figure it out.”

I could figure it out with ease. I would be portrayed as the drunken wife, a poor mother who couldn’t control her daughter, and I would be out on my ear. It wasn’t a pleasant prospect, and I didn’t really have a clear game plan as to how to prevent this worst-case scenario from occurring. I really knew only one thing: if I was to succeed in my new role, I would need not only information from Jennifer, but her cooperation as well.

“Look,” I began, “we can really help each other. If I’m going to be able to help you, I need to be here. If it looks like you and I have a good mother-daughter relationship, my case is strengthened. Then I can concentrate on keeping Charles in check. Do you agree?”

“I think so,” she said slowly, tossing her head in an unexpectedly feminine manner to sweep her hair away from her face. “You think that if I play along and act like a good girl, you can make my life a little more pleasant.”

“That about sums it up. I think we really need each other. Is it a deal?” I asked, holding out my hand.

She thought about for a moment. Then, a reluctant smile came over

her face and she gripped my hand in her smaller one as strongly as her feminine muscles would allow. "It's a deal."

Our eyes met. She had soft brown eyes, and I could see the pain in them. There were actually small tears forming in them. She broke her grip and looked away suddenly. "Well, okay then," she said with a little quaver in her voice. She gulped and brought her voice back to normal. "If I'm going to help you, I need to know more about you. I know you were male and in your early twenties, but what did the Judge bring you to trial for?"

"Well," I answered reluctantly, "do you remember the bank robbery last Saturday?"

"Of course." Her eyes suddenly became wide. With a gasp, she said, "You mean you were one of the bank robbers?"

"Yes," I admitted.

To my surprise, she began to roar with laughter. "This is rich!" she said between spasms of laughter.

"What's so funny?" I demanded.

"Well, for starters, you're married to the president of the bank you robbed!"

I couldn't help it. I began to laugh, too.

It turned out that Charles would be home late that night. The monthly Board of Directors meeting for the bank was being held at the Ovid Country Club, and spouses were thankfully not invited. That meant Jennifer had plenty of time to brief me on a number of subjects, from feminine personal hygiene to makeup and clothing to hairstyling. In spite of the fact that she had done everything in her power to deny her femininity, she was surprisingly knowledgeable on each of the subjects.

"There were about half a dozen of us who were changed into girls and remembered who we had been," she explained. "We each knew we'd have to do what we could to fit in. Some did a better job than others. It's hard for me to understand, but I think a couple of them actually

prefer being girls.”

“So you worked together to figure out how to be girls?” I asked.

“Pretty much. We had been teammates, so it was natural for us to work together. Sam Wallace was pretty much our leader.”

“Sam?”

“It’s short for Samantha,” she explained. “She’s one of the ones I told you about who actually seems happy to be a girl.”

“Well,” I ventured, “if she’s going to be one for the rest of her life, I guess she figures she might as well enjoy it.”

“Is that what you plan to do?” There was suspicion in her voice. She didn’t really want me to be happy being a woman. Misery loves company.

“I really don’t know,” I told her truthfully. “I guess all I want right now is to get through the first few days without making an ass of myself.”

She relaxed, accepting that answer. “I felt the same way. Then after a while, I realized it wasn’t going to work for me. The rest of my teammates starting talking about clothes and boys and giggling just like the ones who didn’t realize they had been changed. It was scary. By Christmas, none of them even wanted to talk about their old lives. I was pretty much alone.”

“It must have been hard for you,” I sympathized, instinctively putting my hand on her shoulder.

“It was,” she agreed, making no move to get away from my comforting hand. “Oh, Rachel, you have no idea how hard it’s been to... to...”

Her voice was breaking and there were big tears in her eyes. “Damn these female hormones anyway!” she snapped. “Everything I think about seems to start me crying. And if I don’t keep on my toes, I find myself acting like a girl.”

“What do you mean?” I prompted.

“I’ll give you an example. Your lipstick is smeared a little. Here.” She

handed me a tube of lipstick.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” I asked.

“Just let yourself go. Don’t think about anything. Just relax.”

I did as she suggested, allowing myself to ‘veg out.’ I just stared at my reflection in the mirror. I found myself looking critically at my face, and without a thought, I had uncapped the lipstick, and carefully reapplied a thin coat to my lips, blotting it daintily with a tissue. The spell was broken when she said, “Do you see what I mean?”

“Wow!” I breathed. “It all seemed so natural to me. I felt as if I had been doing that all my life.”

“It’s part of the spell on you,” she explained. “At first, it helps you over the rough spots so you can function like the person you’re supposed to be. You’re actually thankful for it at first. But I think after awhile, it becomes the master instead of the slave. You start to actually think like the person you’ve become. You start to lose yourself in your new role.”

I could hear the fear in her voice. She didn’t want to lose her old self. Maybe she didn’t have to, I thought. After all, self is nothing more than the sum of all of our experiences and how we deal with them. I was still Robert Joseph Malone, and all of the things that had made me that person were still there. I was one of the lucky residents of Ovid, I realized. I knew who I had been, and I had nothing to be ashamed of, except for my sorry performance that had led me to this fate. I planned to keep on being who I was, even if I was now called upon to be Rachel Tilton.

“Tell me about your old life,” I suggested.

“Why?”

“It might make you feel better to know you still remember it,” I explained.

“Well,” she began, “I grew up in Iowa, around Des Moines. My name then was Jason Albright. I was kind of a big kid from a big family. Dad was a farmer. So I grew up on a diet of hard work and beef and

potatoes. I was a pretty good student, too. I was especially good in math, so when I graduated from high school, I decided to be a math teacher. I had played a lot of high school football, so I was able to get an athletic scholarship at Northwest Missouri State."

"It sounds like a pretty good life," I commented.

"It was," she sighed, "and I really miss it."

"What do you miss the most?" I asked.

"I don't know," she responded. "I'm just too little and weak now. I think I could deal with this girl stuff if I were bigger."

I said honestly, "I don't think you'll get much bigger. Maybe you'll be as tall as me, but that's about it. What about the other stuff?"

"Other stuff?"

"Are you still a good student?"

"Sure, I do well in class." She suddenly looked uncomfortable. "Oh god! I forgot to tell you, though. The school psychologist wants to meet with you tomorrow morning at ten. I said that was just before your Ovid Women's Club meeting at the Country Club, but she insisted."

"Do you know why she wants to see me?" I asked.

"Why do you think? I'm a square peg in a round hole," she said evasively.

"All right," I agreed. "But you'll have to write down instructions so I can find your school."

She did, and then we went over a few other details of my life.

Apparently I had a college degree, which was a pleasant surprise for me. Of course, I didn't feel like I had earned it, but at least I had it, and from a good school, too. It turned out that I had gone to Tulane and majored in Psychology. I had been raised around Houston, so my Texas accent hadn't changed much. It was in college that I had met Charles, and we were married right after school.

She told me about Ovid as well. By the time she was finished, I at least had some idea of where things were in Ovid and who was who. I was grateful for her help. I was sure most people who were transformed had to learn everything the hard way, or at least those people who remembered who they were before.

After another hour or so of briefing, I was beginning to think I could pull off the masquerade. Of course, I had yet to meet Charles, and Jennifer wasn't much help in determining what was going wrong with the marriage. Apparently, Charles and Rachel Tilton were already having difficulties when she was placed in her role.

"I feel as if my head will explode if I learn another thing," I said with a groan. It was already dark outside, and the nearest clock said it was six o'clock. "Maybe we'd better get something to eat."

"Sounds good to me," Jennifer agreed. "Uh, you can cook, can't you?"

I grew up cooking. Since Mom often had to work late, I had become a pretty decent cook. With my limited budget, I had been able to whip up some pretty decent meals when I got to college, too. I didn't want to let Jennifer off the hook, though. "I can cook a little," I finally answered uncertainly. "I mean, mostly what I cook comes out of a box."

"Well, I guess the two of us can figure out something," she replied reluctantly. "I had to take Home Ec this year, so I can do fairly well in the kitchen."

She could, too. She prepared a great chicken dish with just a couple of chicken breasts, bottled salsa, and plain yogurt. I thought it smelled great as I made up a couple of simple salads for us. In short order, we had a very tasty meal in front of us. It was one of the most fun dinners I had had in a long time. We talked about everything we could think of. Both of us liked sports, so we avidly discussed basketball, both of us agreeing that Utah would knock off Chicago in the NBA Finals later that spring. But it was football that was Jennifer's real passion. I began to think she knew the name of every guy who had ever played the game.

"Were you a pro prospect?" I asked over the last bite of chicken.

She shook her head with a shy smile. "No, not me. I was just a big old farm boy who was too strong to get pushed out of the way. That's why I was on offense. All I had to do was stand there and make sure nobody got to the quarterback. I was good at it, but not good enough to make it to the pros. Hell, Northwest Missouri State was the biggest school to offer me a scholarship. Barry was about our best pro prospect. Of course, his name wasn't Barry then. But he was a great halfback. He still is, the lucky stiff. He's still good in all sports. He's the same year in school that I am and he's already playing varsity football and basketball."

"What's this Barry like?" I asked, pushing back from the table so I could cross my legs. I remembered to do so in a demure, ladylike fashion.

Her smile got even wider. "Oh, he's really nice. We were good friends in college, and now he's about the only friend I've got. Sometimes when I'm with him, I sort of forget that I'm a girl. It's just like old times."

"Jennifer, I'm very new at this," I confessed. "What's it going to be like, being a girl?"

"Well," she said, the smile growing a little mischievous, "it's going to be a little different for you. I'm still a sweet young virgin and you're a married woman."

There was a question I wouldn't be able to ask her: what was it like to have sex with a man? It was the first time I had even asked it of myself. Of course, deep down, I had known that if I was to make this marriage work, there would be a time in which it had to be consummated. I didn't look forward to that time.

"Okay, but besides that," I clarified. "You don't seem to like it much."

"I don't like the helplessness of it. I don't like being tied down on the railroad tracks by the villain and have to wait for the hero to show up and rescue me."

"Is that the way it is for girls in Ovid?" I asked. "It sounds like the way it was a couple of generations ago."

She shook her head. "Don't be fooled. Ovid is just like any other town in that regard. When I was a guy, I thought there was equality of the sexes, too. I mean, you heard about it all the time. There were women doctors and lawyers and even women jet pilots. But the prejudices are still out there. Look at me. I'm a natural at math, but do you know what happened to me when I turned in my first A math paper? The teacher said it was so good he wanted to know which of the boys in the class had been helping me. Hell, I was helping most of them!"

Our conversation was interrupted by the sound of a garage door going up.

"Oh-oh," Jennifer said with a start. "It's time to go into our act. Charles is here."

Moments later, a dapper man of about forty stepped into the house from the garage. He wore a well-tailored dark blue pinstripe suit and conservatively patterned red tie over a still-crisp white shirt. He had receding light brown hair just starting to go gray at the temples. He was very distinguished-looking, and a new part of me that had never been there before noticed that he was quite attractive as well. He was also the man I had seen in the bank talking in such a friendly manner to the attractive young teller. So this was Charles Tilton. "Hi," was all he said, to no one in particular.

"Hi, dear," I said in as casual a manner as I could muster. I was trying to hide the fear that he would look at me and scream, "Impostor!" He did look at me quizzically. I suddenly realized that it had probably been a long time since Rachel had called him 'dear.' I found myself wondering if the attractive teller at the bank was his mistress.

"How was the board meeting?" Jennifer asked. I noticed she didn't call him 'Dad.'

"All right," he said noncommittally, resting his brief case against the kitchen island. He looked at the remains of our dinner. "Rachel, are you feeling all right?"

Now what had I done wrong? "I'm fine. Why?"

“I don’t see any wine out on the table. I thought you always had wine with your dinner,” he explained.

I shrugged. “I just didn’t feel like drinking anything tonight. Jennifer made a great chicken dish, and...”

“Jennifer made dinner?” I think this was a greater shock for him than the absence of wine. “Did I walk into the wrong house?”

I don’t know what possessed her to do it, but a wicked flash shot through Jennifer’s eyes as she got up from the table and gently hugged Charles. “Oh, Daddy, I love to cook. I learned this recipe in Home Ec. There’s more chicken if you want me to fix it for you.”

She said it in such a dreamy, little girl voice that it was all I could do to keep from laughing. I knew she had never treated him this way in her short existence as Jennifer.

“Uh no, thanks, honey,” he stammered. “I ate at the club. I’ll be in my study if anyone calls.” He rushed out of the room before we could reply.

I grinned at Jennifer. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Just helping you out,” she grinned back. “If this whole idea of yours is going to work, I probably need to play the perfect daughter to your perfect wife. It was actually kind of fun to see him squirm like that. This could be the most fun I’ve had since I came to Ovid.”

“Then why don’t you do the dishes?” I suggested. “That will really blow his mind.”

“That’s a dirty trick!” she laughed, but she started loading the dishwasher anyway.

I made good use of the time. We had Charles off balance. That was a good start. It was time for me to confuse him even more. I hadn’t changed out of my skirt yet, so I decided to give him the full treatment. I tiptoed up to my bedroom and put on a pair of two-inch heels. Jennifer had made me experiment with them earlier, so I was fairly confident of my ability to negotiate the stairs in heels.

Charles was busily entering data on his computer as I walked in. He looked up, almost in amazement as I slowly walked across the room, trying not to look too obviously sexy. I walked behind him and put my hands on his shoulders. His muscles were tense, like my Mother's muscles had been after a long day of waitressing.

"You shouldn't still be working," I told him in a low voice as I rubbed his shoulders and neck. I was surprised to find that this activity was actually causing some interesting reactions in my own body. I felt my nipples stiffen and an unexpected tingling between my legs. I had no idea this body could get turned on so easily. I would have to be careful. "You've been working all day."

"I know," he agreed gruffly, "but I have to get this done tonight. I'm meeting with Eric Vulman of Vulman Industries in the morning. He wants us to finance a big military contract for him. It's the biggest deal we've ever done with him, so I need to get this finished."

"Well, would you like some hot tea?"

He turned and looked up at me. I thought I could sense his expression softening. "Yes, I would. That would be very nice."

I turned to go. "I'll get it for you right now."

He suddenly, gently, grabbed my arm. "What's with Jennifer?" he asked as I turned back to him. I was sure he really wanted to ask what was with me as well.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, she never calls me 'Daddy.' Hell, she never calls me anything. It's as if she doesn't even consider me to be her father. Now, here she is, fixing dinner and hugging me. If she had been wearing anything but those rags she always has on, I would suspect that someone had replaced her with the Stepford Daughter or something."

"I think that was Stepford Wives," I smiled. At least he had a sense of humor.

"That's another thing," he went on. "There's something different about you, too."

“Me?” Little old me?

“Yes,” he continued. “You seem more... affectionate—more alive.”

This was a critical moment, I knew. I needed to tell him to come upstairs and I’d show him just how alive I really was, but in that moment, I froze. I just couldn’t do it. I knew in my heart that I was physically a woman, but I hadn’t seen what was between my legs with my own eyes yet. Hell, I hadn’t even gone to the bathroom yet. The thought of having a man down there was just too much for my overloaded mind to take.

The, suddenly, the moment was gone. The light that had begun to shine in his eyes retreated, and he gently released my arm. “Well anyhow, I like it. Now I have to get some work done.”

“Okay,” I said meekly, and I left him to his work.

Back in the kitchen, Jennifer was just finishing the dishes. “How did it go?”

“How did what go?” I asked.

“You and Charles,” she said softly so as not to be heard by him. She frowned. “It didn’t go all that well, did it?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” I replied, sitting down at the kitchen table, relieved to not be standing in heels. “It’s just that... just that...”

Now I knew how Jennifer had felt that afternoon. I could feel tears welling up inside me. Softly they spilled out. Jennifer rushed to my side and took my hand. “Come on, Rachel, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t think I can do it, Jennifer,” I sobbed softly. “To save this marriage, I’m going to have to go to bed with him, but I just don’t think I can.”

“I understand,” she said, squeezing my hand. “I’m not supposed to be going to bed with guys at my age, but I’ve thought about how I’m going to handle that when I’m older. I don’t think I can do it either. But what are we going to do? If you don’t—can’t—we’ve lost our chance. He’ll take me away from you, Rachel, and I couldn’t stand that. I’ve felt

better having you around today than at any time since my transformation.”

I knew what she meant. In the short time that I had known her, I had felt myself becoming very close to her. Without her near me, I was afraid I would become just like she had been—bitter and resentful over what had been done to me.

With nothing better to do, we sat together in the den and watched television. As two former males, we sought out the sports channels and had soon lost ourselves in a basketball game. The game had just ended when Charles stepped in the room. “What are you two watching?”

“A basketball game,” we said together, then started giggling at our identical answers.

Charles shook his head in confusion. “Well, I’m off to bed. Tomorrow will be a busy day at the bank. Good night, ladies.”

We both mumbled good night and sighed as he left. “This evening could have gone better,” I commented.

Jennifer patted my leg. “Tomorrow will go better.” Then she was off to bed.

I stayed up for another hour, idly surfing through the channels. The Tilton home was equipped with a satellite receiver, so I had more channels to surf through than I had even known existed. The Tiltons lived well, I realized as I shut down the set and headed off for bed. They lived well, but not happily. That had to change, I understood, and I was going to be the only one who could do it.

Using the toilet for the first time was a new experience for me, and really the first time I had a chance to be completely aware of the strange absence between my legs. Sitting to pee wasn’t so bad; every male did it occasionally. The odd sensation was that of having liquid practically spill from my body like an overturned glass rather than the pressure of liquid I had felt as a male.

As I got ready for bed, I finally took the time to privately examine this

body I had been given. Whatever misuse this body had experienced from too much wine, there was no apparent damage. I suspected the drinking was part of a vicious circle. Perhaps Charles began to ignore Rachel and she was forced to find solace in a bottle. As the drinking got worse, he began to ignore her more. Add to this the strain of a daughter with problems of her own which the parents couldn't even imagine and you had a runaway truck about to hit a brick wall. Dysfunctional didn't even begin to describe the Tilton family.

I stood naked in front of the mirror carefully appraising my assets. My breasts were still round and fairly firm with little evidence of middle age sag. Likewise, my hips were maybe a bit wide and the waist an inch or so thicker than I might have wished for, but it was a body which would still turn a few heads if you dressed it in a two-piece swimsuit.

When I had been a young man in my early twenties, late thirties had seemed like the age to buy a walker and check into cemetery plots. I even had personal evidence of that. I had seen my mother hobbling about in her last year or two, and she never lived to see forty. Now that I had suddenly been advanced to my late thirties, I didn't feel as if I looked all that old. I wondered if I was just unusual or if most women in their late thirties were still somewhat young in appearance.

I slipped on a nightgown and got ready for bed. I still wasn't tired, so I looked around for something to read until I got sleepy.

Then, on a bookshelf in my bedroom, I spotted an almanac. I had always enjoyed thumbing through them, and I knew they usually had a list of the birth dates of famous people. It wouldn't hurt, I thought, to take a look at who my new contemporaries were. Demi Moore was a little older, I thought. I looked her up. No, she was younger, but only by a year. Then I spotted Michelle Pfeiffer. To my amazement, she was actually over forty. How could that be? Catwoman was over forty? Jane Seymour was even older. She was a good ten years older than me. And what about Meg Ryan? Everybody's favorite girl next door was my age!

I wasn't sure who my competition was for Charles, I thought as I

drifted off to sleep, but a woman Meg Ryan's age certainly should have a fighting chance.

"Rachel!"

Who was Rachel? I didn't care. I was warm and cozy in my bed, although something didn't seem quite right...

"Rachel, wake up!"

"Huh?" I mumbled, suddenly remembering in the back of my mind that I knew someone named Rachel. I sat up, feeling the odd sensation of my breasts dropping and my nipples running across the silky nightgown I wore. Oh yeah, I remembered. I was Rachel.

"I didn't want you to oversleep," Jennifer explained, smiling as I opened my eyes. To my delight, she was holding out a glass of orange juice for me. And to my surprise, she was attired in a very feminine fashion. She wore a white cable knit sweater, a gray skirt which came a couple of inches above her knees, white tights and gray shoes with just a small heel. She even wore a gold necklace and matching earrings.

"A new image for you?" I asked, sipping my juice. It was sweet and cold, just the way I liked it.

"Pretty much," she admitted. "Old Charley actually seemed to like my little girl routine last night. I thought I'd give it a try at school. I suppose if I look like the nice feminine daughter, it makes you look like a more fit mother."

"I suppose it does," I agreed, standing up and stretching. "Is Charles up?"

"Up and gone," she replied. "He had a breakfast meeting. Don't worry, though. Rachel never got up to fix breakfast. Charles is a cereal and juice kind of guy in the mornings."

"Did Rachel and Charles ever talk?" I asked, searching through my closet for something to wear. How did women ever choose the right

outfit when they had such a variety of clothing to pick from?

“Not very often,” Jennifer said, picking a tan two-piece suit and a brown blouse for me. “Wear the two-inch brown heels over in that blue box on the shelf.”

“You know,” I observed, “for someone who doesn’t like being a girl, you seem to have figured out how to be one.”

“I would probably have been locked up if I hadn’t,” she countered, selecting a beige bra and panties and tan pantyhose for me.

I slipped off the nightgown and picked up the panties.

“Uh,” Jennifer began, “before you put those on, you probably should shave your legs.”

I looked at my legs. There was only a tiny trace of stubble there. “Do I have to?”

“Only if you don’t want to look like the Bride of King Kong,” she grinned. “The easiest way is in the bathtub. Then, you can take a bubble bath. I hate to admit it, but I’ve come to like bubble baths. You probably will, too.”

“All right,” I sighed, turning on the water and adding some bubble bath. It smelled like lilacs.

“I’ll see you after school,” she said, tossing her hair back. “Do you have the directions to the school?”

“In my purse. Oh, is this psychologist real or a shade?”

“Just a shade,” she said over her shoulder. “Got to go or I’ll miss my bus.”

I heard the door slam just as I stepped into the tub. This was really my first time to be completely alone and reflect on what had happened to me. The day before, I had been practically in shock, and the long sessions with Jennifer had stuffed my brain with so many new facts that I hadn’t had much time to reflect.

As I eased my new body down into the tub, I could feel muscles I

thought were permanently tight begin to loosen. As I sank into the water, the weight of my new breasts seemed to lessen, and I felt a pleasant sensation between my legs as the warm water caressed my vagina.

What would it feel like to have a man enter me there? I wondered. The water washing against my new sex actually felt pleasant. Would a penis be a pleasant sensation as well? I touched my clitoris and felt a sudden shiver of pleasure. I had touched a clitoris on several occasions as a man, but of course, it hadn't been mine. I wasn't the most experienced male lover in the world, but I suspected I had gotten my share. The girls I had been with had enjoyed being touched there. I now understood why.

Would I be able to play my new role all the way and make love to Charles? I still wasn't sure. I doubted if Rachel and Charles indulged in sex often if at all, but I knew I would have to do it if I was to save the marriage. Was it really that important, though? I was now a college graduate. I wasn't helpless. Even though Charles was a powerful man in Ovid, I might be able to get custody of Jennifer. We could leave him. Let him have his girlfriend, whoever she was. The more I thought about it, it had to be that young teller I had seen him with at the bank.

As I slowly stroked my new clitoris, I reconsidered those thoughts. Charles didn't seem to be a bad man—just a preoccupied one. Who could say what had driven him to be so distant with his family? Between Rachel's drinking and Jennifer's reluctance to play the role of his daughter, perhaps he had been driven to seek comfort elsewhere. Perhaps deep down inside, he was really a sensitive, caring lover and... oh god!

A wave of pleasure washed over me, and I felt my entire body melt into the water. I felt my face flush. I had just given myself an orgasm. I hadn't really intended to do it. It was a new experience to accidentally masturbate. As a male, when you masturbated, you did it on purpose.

Was that what it would feel like to have Charles in me? Would I feel such pleasure? If it was like the male experience, the real thing was always more pleasurable than Rosy Palm. If that was true for me now

in this new form, I had something to look forward to. But enough for now, I thought. There were other things to be done that day. I had to go to Jennifer's school and then attend a women's luncheon Jennifer had told me about. I was going to have to play the role of Rachel Tilton, I realized, picking up a razor, and I might as well do it with smooth legs.

I had to use the technique Jennifer had shown me to get ready. If I let myself go, my body seemed to function automatically, shaving legs, donning clothes, and applying makeup. It wasn't hard to reassert control, either. As I was running a brush through my hair, I took control once more. Now in control, I gave myself one last critical look in the mirror. Not too bad for an old broad, I thought to myself. Maybe being thirty-seven wasn't being old after all.

I got to Ovid High with time to spare. After living my entire life in San Antonio and then Wichita, I was used to the distances in cities. Ovid was small, though. I guessed it was probably no more than fifteen thousand people, most of whom seemed to be shades. I parked my car—a nice little Chrysler Cirrus—in front of the high school. The school had a fifties look to it. It was a one-story building which sprawled out over the better part of a city block.

Inside, classes were in session, so I found the administration office with no trouble. A shade secretary seated under a black and gold banner which proclaimed 'Go Eagles' smiled at me and directed me to the school psychologist's office. I was relieved that the secretary didn't seem to find anything amiss about me. I looked like just one more mother going to check on her child.

"I'm Hanna Williams," the psychologist said, offering me her hand. We shook in a light, feminine fashion. I was relieved to find that although they were semi-transparent, shades were solid to the touch. I didn't want to have to be careful not to pass through them. Apparently, that wasn't to be a problem.

Hanna Williams was about my age—my new age. She, too, was quite attractive, her mostly brown hair graying only a few strands at a time. She was slim and well built, dressed in a tailored gray suit. She

reminded me of an older version of Susan Jager, my lawyer.

“Would you like some coffee?” she asked, motioning me to a seat.

“I’d love some,” I replied with a smile. I meant it, too. It had taken me so long to get ready that I had had nothing but the glass of juice Jennifer had brought me.

“Well,” she said primly when I had my coffee, “I suppose you’re wondering why I asked you here today, Mrs. Tilton.”

I smiled. “Please call me Rachel.”

“Yes, thank you, Rachel.” I noticed she didn’t ask me to call her ‘Hanna.’ Apparently, it was Dr. Williams who was going to give me the bad news.

“Several of Jennifer’s teachers have noticed for some time now that Jennifer does not seem to be... happy,” she began, her hands folded in front of her on the desk.

“Is she doing poorly in school?” I asked with mock concern. I knew from Jennifer’s briefing that she was an A student.

“Oh no! In fact, her grades have actually improved over the last year or so—particularly in math and science. Her grades aren’t an issue; rather, she doesn’t seem very happy with her life.”

“Her life?”

Dr. Williams fidgeted in her chair. “That’s right. Here she is, a very attractive, intelligent young girl from a presumably well-to-do family.” She looked up at me, as if to confirm that we were well to do. I gave her no visual clue and said nothing, so she went on, “She just seems to be unhappy being who she is. She affects very unfeminine attire and manner. If I didn’t know better, I would assume when I talked to her that I was talking to a boy.”

“She has always seemed to be something of a tomboy,” I admitted. If only you knew the truth, I thought to myself. I wondered what she thought of my performance. After all, in a way, she was talking to a boy now.

She shook her head. "It goes beyond that. Many girls are tomboys at her age, but she seems to think she would be happier being a boy."

"Did she tell you that?" I wanted to know. Surely Jennifer had more sense than to confide in this woman.

"Not exactly, no," Dr. Williams backpedalled. She stopped for a moment to collect her thoughts. "Sometimes in my profession, we see patients who would seem to want to be the opposite sex. The most chronic of these seem to be males who want to be female. A little of this is just natural curiosity—men who would like to know what it's like to be a woman, and women who are curious about what it must be like to be a man. Everyone imagines what it must be like. Have you ever thought what it must be like to be a man?"

"Of course," I answered smoothly. Until yesterday, I had thought about it all the time.

"But with Jennifer, the need to be male seems stronger," she continued.

"Are you suggesting that my daughter is a—what do you call them? —transsexual?" I asked, trying to sound indignant. In truth, I was rather enjoying this. I wondered what the good doctor would have said if I had told her that until a year and a half ago, my daughter had been as male as male could be. Given what Jennifer had told me about the Judge's proclivity for changing the sex of his victims, I imagined Dr. Williams would be dumbfounded if she knew how many of her acquaintances had changed sex. Transsexual indeed!

"I don't know," she said, surprising me with her candor. "But I do know that sometimes girls feel powerless. They question their worth in society and think it might have been better if they were born male and more in control of their lives. This can be especially true if they don't have any strong female role models in their lives."

Whoops. I knew now where this conversation was going. Rachel Tilton had been anything but a strong female role model. From what Jennifer had told me, she drank too much, spent most of her free hours either with equally frivolous women at the Country Club or shopping for

clothes she didn't need and seldom wore. When it came to her marriage, she was oblivious to the danger that she was about to lose her husband, probably to a girl who reminded him of all the things that had originally attracted him to Rachel: intelligence, poise, and good looks.

"Are you suggesting," I asked quietly, "that I am not a suitable role model for Jennifer?" I was sure it might someday be suggested in a custody battle. I had visions of this woman being called to the witness stand to infer that I was not a fit role model. Her testimony would be damning.

"Please, Mrs. Tilton," Dr. Williams said sympathetically, "I'm merely making you aware of a problem I see in Jennifer. Perhaps if you're aware of the problem, you and your husband can do something to alleviate the situation."

It was actually good advice, I thought as I made my way back to the car. I doubted if the shade who had been Rachel would have paid much attention to it. She would probably have stuck her head in the sand and continued her bad habits. I resolved to do better. Rachel wasn't, in reality, my daughter, but she had quickly become my friend. I knew—as did she—that she would be female for the rest of her life. It was up to me to ensure that her life was a pleasant one.

That meant it was more important than ever that I provide her with the positive sides of being female, but to do that, I would have to discover what they were. At that moment, I thought as I slipped into the car, consciously being careful to keep my legs together and my skirt down, I would have gladly given up another fifteen years just to be male again. In fact, if the Judge would do it for me, I would be happy to be transported to a prison cell as my old male self and cool my heels for fifteen or twenty years. But since that wasn't going to happen, I would have to try to be the best Rachel Tilton I could be.

I looked at my watch. The appointment had only taken half an hour. It would only take me ten minutes to get to the Country Club. I decided it was time to visit Charles and beard the lion in his own den. As I pulled up in front of the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank, I remembered all the

old clichés about the criminal returning to the scene of the crime. It seemed like an eternity ago when Jimmy Ray, Enos and I had pulled up in front of the bank. I wondered what had happened to Enos. I couldn't imagine him being able to get away. Maybe the Judge just considered him to be too small a fish to catch. Or maybe he was out in some pasture chewing grass with Jimmy Ray.

As I got out of the car, I noticed Susan Jager's law offices were located over the bank. I wondered for a moment if Susan could be Charles' girl friend. If I were Charles (and I wished that I were), I'd be interested in her. Of course, she had that new wedding ring, so I doubted if she would be interested in him. My money was still on the teller.

Judy Cartwright was Charles' secretary. Jennifer had given me a rundown on her. She had been his father's secretary when he had been President of the bank and had been Charles' secretary for the three years he had been President since his father's death. Of course, how much of that story was real, I had no way of knowing. She was a shade, about fifty-five or so, I guessed. She had the gray hair, patrician manner, and conservative dress which made her the textbook example of a bank president's secretary. She smiled pleasantly when she saw me. "Mrs. Tilton, how nice to see you. We don't see you nearly often enough here."

It was said as a pleasantry, but she emphasized the correct words just right. She was waving a red flag, warning me to be careful. "It's nice to see you, too, Judy," I replied. "Is Charles in?"

"Just a moment," she said, touching the intercom key. "He's in a meeting." She looked delighted to have an excuse to break up his meeting.

The meeting involved a closed door. I wondered who was in there with him. I was pretty sure I was going to find out soon.

Charles rushed out of his office. "Rachel?" he asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh no," I told him pleasantly, grabbing his hand in a loving fashion. "I

just had some time before my meeting and thought I'd see how your morning meeting went."

He was on familiar ground, so he visibly relaxed. "It went very well. Come in and I'll tell you about it."

As I entered his office, I wasn't surprised to see the pretty young teller I had seen on Saturday. She looked up at me from her seat across the desk from Charles' seat. She was about my old age, with long brown hair that shined with vitality. Her blue eyes were alive and sparkling. As she stood, I could see that she was not just pretty—she was beautiful. Her outfit was businesslike, but fit tightly in all the right places, and if I thought my skirt at an inch above the knees was short, hers seemed to go practically to the top of her thighs. She smiled what was meant to be a pleasant smile, but I was reminded of the smile you see in the horror movies when the vampiress looks up from her prey.

"Rachel, I don't believe you've met Courtney," Charles said smoothly. "Courtney Francis, this is my wife, Rachel."

She extended her hand and gave me a smile so artificial she could have earned an award for poor acting. "I'm pleased to meet you, Rachel. Charles has told me so much about you."

I took her hand, returning her smile with as much venom as I could muster. I was sure Charles had told her all about me, starting with my wife doesn't understand me. There was no doubt that this was my competition. The only question running through my mind was had he taken her to bed yet? She was obviously playing the you're so wonderful game with Charles, and he was obviously falling for it. Well, why not? As nearly as I could tell, Rachel hadn't done much to save the marriage. That was about to change, though.

"I'm glad you dropped by, Rachel," Charles said, unaware of the contest of wills that was shaping up in front of his desk. "I was just getting ready to call you. Eric Vulman wants us to have dinner with him and his wife, Grace, tonight at Winston's. We're going to celebrate. He has a new military contract that we're going to help him finance. He wants us to meet them there at six thirty."

I smiled a loving smile at him, as much for Courtney's consideration as anything. "It sounds like fun."

"Fine," he said formally. "Now, if you'll both excuse me, I need to get ready for my next appointment."

"Of course, darling," I practically breathed at him. From the corner of my eye, I could see Courtney silently fuming. I suspected I might have interrupted her next move in the game.

Charles came up and took my arm. When Courtney was out of hearing range, he turned me to face him and said sternly, "I just wanted to make sure you were careful at your luncheon today."

"Careful?"

"Damn it, Rachel, I mean watch the wine. This dinner tonight is very important."

I leaned over and kissed him gently on the cheek. It was my first experience kissing a man. I must admit I wasn't sure I liked it. "Don't worry," I told him softly. "I'm not the same woman anymore." Truer words were never spoken.

I waved a cheery wave at Courtney on the way out and caught Judy's knowing smirk. Judy and I exchanged friendly goodbyes by looking gratefully into each other's eyes.

Even with my stop at the bank, I was early for the luncheon. What I didn't realize was that Ovid's leading women always arrived late for events so they could make a suitable entrance. The Ovid Women's Club was an exclusive body, Jennifer had told me. It consisted of only twenty-five members, all leading Ovidians. Most were there because of whom they had married, but there were a few exceptions.

Since I didn't really know any of the women, I was forced to fake it, echoing cheery greetings and making small talk. Most of the women were very much like I suspected the original Rachel Tilton had been. They were snooty and shallow, caring only about being lauded due to the status of their husbands. I hoped Charles didn't need me to befriend any of the women in the club, for I found almost all of them

boring.

There were two exceptions, however. The first was an attractive, matronly woman roughly my new age. She had short brown hair, just beginning to gray and a pleasant smile which radiated both humor and intelligence. By listening carefully, I determined that her name was Betty Vest. She was the President of Capta College, a small liberal arts school I hadn't realized existed in Ovid. I made it a point to move into the circle that was talking with her. It was like being back on campus at Wichita State, listening to someone who could think without straining something.

The other exception was our guest speaker. She was Dr. Carolyn Miner, the Superintendent of Ovid's schools. Like Betty Vest, she was poised and friendly, exuding an air of intelligence. She was a little older than Betty, but equally vibrant. I resolved to age as gracefully as she was.

When we were all seated for lunch, a young waiter, about my former age, set a martini in front of me. "What's this?" I asked.

"But Mrs. Tilton, you always have one," he explained, confused. "You told me last fall to always place one at your table without being asked. Is there something wrong with it?"

"No," I sighed. "Nothing is wrong. I just don't believe I care for one today."

This statement was met with surprise from most of the women, but I noticed that both Betty Vest and Carolyn Miner, sitting down and across the table from me, had pleased smiles. There was more to them than met the eye, I thought.

The waiter then took our orders for lunch. The choices were a chicken breast or a luncheon steak. Given what had happened to Jimmy Ray, I had decided to swear off beef for a while. Of course, I realized grimly, there was an equal chance that the chickens in the area hadn't always been chickens, either. Maybe I would become a vegetarian. It would be good for my figure if nothing else.

I survived the luncheon small talk, and even managed to cull out the names of the women seated around me. Most were shades, and I began to realize that their identities would probably eventually be taken by more victims of the Judge. I suspected he would not rest until he had populated the entire town. One of the women seated across from me was real. She was the wife of the mayor of Ovid, and she seemed to have no memory of her previous life. I found myself wondering who she had been. Maybe she had been a man as I had been. In any case, she seemed as vacuous as most of the other women in the group. What had Rachel ever seen in these women?

She did do one thing for me though. She introduced me to Betty Vest, who was sitting on her left. "Yes," Betty said, "Rachel and I worked together on the United Way campaign two years ago, didn't we, Rachel?"

"Yes," I replied glibly. I could see in Betty's eyes that she somehow knew that I was not the Rachel Tilton she had worked with before.

"I haven't seen much of you at civic functions lately," Betty went on.

"I'll have to get involved again," I promised, picking up my cue.

It was obviously the answer she wanted, for she suggested, "If that is the case, I have something which may be of interest to you." She handed me her business card. "If you could make a meeting in my office tomorrow at nine, I'd like to discuss it with you."

"I'd like that," I said, taking the card.

After lunch, I rushed home and wrote out notes on everyone I remembered at the luncheon. As one of Ovid's leading women (at least by marriage), I would be expected to know them all. Frankly, I found them all dull with the exception of Betty and Carolyn. Carolyn had actually been the luncheon speaker, and I had found as I listened that she was, indeed, an intelligent woman. She spoke of the need for providing an education for Ovid's children which would prepare them for the real world, learning real world skills and preparing for life. I had heard it all before, but when Carolyn spoke of those things, I believed she would really do them and not just talk about them like so many

educators did.

I was excited about the opportunity to do something at the college. I could see already why Rachel had turned to a life of shopping and drinking and attending boring women's meetings. There had been nothing else for her to do. Oh, I realized that was at least partially her fault, but it was easy to see how a woman could fall into the trap of meaningless activity. I actually felt sorry for most of the women who were there. Shades or not, their lives seemed empty. That wasn't going to happen to me.

It was nearly four, and I was in my bedroom wondering what outfit to wear. I had simply too little experience and resolved to ask Jennifer. I heard the front door close. "Jennifer?"

"Yeah, it's me, Rachel."

"I need your help," I called.

She walked into my room, still looking absolutely lovely. I don't think she had any idea just how attractive she really was. She looked at the three outfits that I had laid out on the bed.

"I need to know which one I should wear," I told her.

"To what?"

"Oh. Your fa—Charles and I have to go to a dinner tonight at someplace called Winston's," I explained. "Since I didn't know anything about the place, I wasn't sure how fancy it was."

"Well," Jennifer told me, "it's not all that fancy, but it is the best place in Ovid. They have fantastic steaks. I just wish this little body I have now could do justice to them like my old one. I can barely eat half of their smallest steak now."

Steaks! I hoped they had something else on the menu as well. I didn't think I could ever eat another steak.

"So who are you going with?"

"Someone named Vulman."

She nodded. "That would be Eric and Grace Vulman. Vulman Industries is the biggest business in town. So did Charles' meeting with Vulman go well?"

"Apparently so," I said. "That's the reason for the dinner."

"Well, then none of these outfits will do," she told me, scooping them up by the hangers and hanging them back in my closet.

"But they all looked nice," I protested.

"For day wear, yes," she called from the closet, "but you need something for evening wear. Here."

She had returned with a dark blue cocktail dress which had a subtle sparkle to it. It appeared to be about the size of a large handkerchief.

"Where's the rest of it?" I asked, only half joking.

She gave me her wicked little smile. "This will look great on you. You know, for an old broad, you look pretty good."

"Thanks," I said dryly, "I needed that."

She was right, though. As she helped me get ready, it became apparent that the dress really did look great on me. It was the shortest thing I had worn in my short time as a woman, but I had to admit, I had the figure for it. It was questionable what part of me men would notice first in the dress—the full breasts that peeked out over the top of the dress or my long, slim legs which looked great in the black heels and smoky nylons Jennifer had convinced me to wear.

"Charles will jump me the minute he comes in the door," I told her as I finished off my outfit with a pair of diamond earrings and a gold necklace with small diamonds in it.

"Isn't that the idea?" she giggled. "If this outfit doesn't save the marriage, Charles must be gay."

"I'm sorry to leave you alone tonight," I said.

She shook her head. "Don't worry about it. I was going to go over to Barry's and study. We planned to split a pizza. Now, go ahead and get

ready to wiggle your little ass in front of Charles when he gets home. I know he'll like that outfit."

Charles did appreciate the outfit. In fact, his mouth dropped open when he saw me in it. He slipped his arm around me and said, "You know, I don't know what's come over you the last day or so, but I hope it keeps on coming over you."

"What do you mean?" I asked innocently.

"Well," he began, "I notice you haven't been drinking. It seems to have changed your whole personality. Now, you're more like the girl I married."

I didn't know about that, but I had been until the day before about the age Rachel had been when she married Charles. I began to realize that I had brought to Rachel a youth in spirit which she had apparently lost. I also began to realize that Charles wasn't such a bad guy after all. In fact, he was really nice looking.

Now what had made me think that? I wondered as I leaned into his arms and gently kissed him. It wasn't like the kiss the night before. This one was more meaningful, and I had to admit, it wasn't as bad as I had thought it would be. In fact, if I was completely honest with myself, it was rather enjoyable.

Charles broke the mood, though, when he said, "We'd better go or we'll be late. Is Jennifer going to be all right by herself?"

"She's already gone," I told him. Then I explained that she had had an invitation from Barry to have dinner at his house and study together.

"She said she'd be home about ten."

Charles frowned. "Jennifer is with a boy? I didn't think she was ever going to be interested in dating. Now that she has a date, I'm not so sure I like the idea."

I laughed, "You're going to have to get used to it, but she doesn't think of it as a date. She and Barry are just friends. Besides, they'll just be studying at his house." I was sure I was right. Jennifer had mentioned that Barry was one of her old friends. If she said she was going to

Barry's to study, then that was what she was going to do—nothing more and nothing less. I just wondered to myself if studying was all that was on Barry's mind.

As we drove to Winston's, Charles was in a very good mood. And why shouldn't he be? I thought. Business was going well, and for the first time in recent memory, he seemed to have an ideal family. I found myself hoping it would be enough to overcome Courtney's machinations, but I knew I had a long way to go.

Winston's was a modest little steakhouse on the edge of town. Situated on a small wooded hill, it enjoyed a view of Ovid spread out in the valley below. I hoped they had something besides steak on the menu. I didn't know when Jimmy Ray would meet his fate, but my stomach turned at the thought of steak. The restaurant was surprisingly fancy inside, complete with carpet, drapes, soft music that sounded classical and table linen.

The Vulmans had just arrived, so Charles introduced us before we were seated, or I should say re-introduced us since apparently Rachel knew them but not well. That seemed odd to me for a moment, but as I was introduced to them, it became obvious to me that Eric and Grace Vulman were not the type of people Rachel Tilton would enjoy. They were too bright. There was something else about them as well. They weren't shades, but it was almost as if they were larger than life. I got the same feeling around them that I got around Betty Vest or Carolyn Miner—or for that matter, around the Judge. What was going on in Ovid anyway?

Eric Vulman was perhaps fifty, tall and a bit on the heavy side. He was not handsome by any means, but he was absolutely charming. Although he was dressed in an expensive suit, he looked as if he would be more at home in less formal attire. He walked with a pronounced limp, but seemed to have no trouble walking to our table. He was very friendly and very down to earth, and I could see how Grace, or any other woman for that matter, could be attracted to him. I found myself being attracted to him, too, much to my remaining masculine chagrin.

That was the oddest thing I had noticed yet in my new identity. I still considered myself at heart to be a heterosexual male, but something was subtly changing my outlook. I was starting to notice women less for their sexual attributes and more for how they deported themselves. Rather than viewing them as potential mates, I was starting to size them up as potential friends. Men, on the other hand, were more... stimulating to me. Well, to be honest, they were becoming more attractive to me. I was starting to see Charles now not as just an obstacle who had to be overcome, but as someone I might actually enjoy going to bed with. It was still an odd thought, but no longer a completely repugnant one. It was more like the feeling I had the first time I went off a diving board. The idea of diving was not so bad. What was bad was taking that very first step.

Grace Vulman was one of those women I sized up as a potential friend. She was attractive—one of the most attractive women I had ever met. She appeared to be about my age, but I looked like a hag compared to her, and I was no slouch. The way she talked and moved reminded me of the old song 'Poetry in Motion.' Grace was not simply her name; she was grace itself. We made an interesting contrast at the table—me a blonde in my dark blue cocktail dress and dark shoes and stockings, and Grace, a stunning brunette, in an equally revealing white dress with pale stockings and winter white shoes. I was thankful the weather was fairly mild for February, or we would have probably both be shivering while trying to look sexy. I take that back. Grace would have found a way not to shiver, no matter how cold she was.

Fortunately, there was a variety of non-beef dishes on the menu. I chose a chicken in a wine sauce. After we had all ordered, Grace announced she needed to make a trip to the ladies' room. I realized as she looked expectantly at me that this was my cue to join her. I was about to be initiated into the strange ritual of going to the ladies room with another woman.

Once we were in the ladies' room, she said, "Your dress is really terrific. Did you get it at March's?"

"Uh, I really don't remember," I replied evasively.

She then surprised me by giving me a knowing look and a sparkling laugh. "Oh, that's right. You're a little new at this being a woman thing, aren't you?"

"You know?" I gasped. How many other people knew? Was I the laughing stock of Ovid—the man who had been turned into a woman? Was it a headline in the local paper? No, that couldn't be. Jennifer said there were many others who had suffered the same fate, and she had mentioned that it was usually not talked about. "How?"

She laughed again, but it was the sort of laugh that made you feel comfortable. "You'll figure it out before long. Everyone does. Let's just say that there are four types of people in Ovid. There are the shades, people who don't remember who they were, people like you, and people like me."

"So you are—what? —like the Judge?"

She smiled warmly. "No one is quite like the Judge. But yes, my husband and I are something like him. You'll meet others like us as well."

"But who are you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "That's something even I can't tell you. You have to discover it for yourself. But don't worry. You will. I do like the dress, though. Since you didn't get it from me, you must have gotten it from Vera."

"Vera?"

"Vera March. She's the wife of the owner of March's Department Store. Since I own a women's clothing shop, she and I are something of competitors. She and I go way back." She smiled enigmatically.

"Way back."

"Oh."

"So how do you like it?"

"It's a nice restaurant," I replied.

There was that beautiful laugh again. "No, silly, I mean how do you

like being a woman?"

"I don't know," I said truthfully. "It happened so fast, and it's all been so new to me."

She placed her hand lightly on my arm. Even her touch had a quality that was hard to describe, but I felt as if something of her was suddenly infused in me. "You'll get used to it. You're the son of a strong mother. Ovid needs women like you."

As we returned to the table together, I had a feeling (woman's intuition?) that Grace and I would be good friends. I even promised to drop by her shop sometime. Charles sensed it, too. On the drive home, he told me, "Eric Vulman likes you very much. He said that his wife liked you very much, too. The two of you were chatting like old sorority sisters."

"I liked them, too," I said truthfully. My opinion of the forces that controlled Ovid had gone up a notch or two. Of course, I had really had only the example of the Judge to form an opinion. It wasn't that the Judge was bad in my estimation. He was just so... omnipotent that it was hard to think of him as less than a god. A god? Was that what he was? Then that meant...

My thoughts were interrupted as we pulled into our garage. The house was dark, so Jennifer must still be with Barry, I thought. I looked at my watch. It was nearly nine. That meant Charles and I had an hour to ourselves. I wondered...

It was now or never, I thought as we climbed the stairs together. I had faked a turned heel to get him to put his arm around me as we went up the stairs. He held me closely, and when we got to the top, I smiled and said, "Do you want to come in for a little nightcap?"

His eyes lit up and he smiled as he caught my meaning. "Yes, Rachel, I'd like that very much."

It would, of course, be my first time to make love as a woman. I was still not certain I would be able to go through with it, but I had to give it my best shot. We held each other closely, feeling the friction of our

bodies through our clothes. Charles kissed me, his tongue in my mouth, and I found I liked it very much. I was beginning to feel my nipples becoming erect, and there was a strong sensation of something wet between my legs. I pictured myself on that diving board again, trying to step off the end. We started to grab at each other's clothing.

It was then that we heard the front door slam so hard that I thought it must have pulled the frame loose.

"Jennifer!" I whispered, releasing Charles. He let go of me as well as we stood there, looking like two young children who had been caught raiding the cookie jar.

"Maybe later?" he said shyly.

"Definitely," I breathed, turning to see what was wrong with Jennifer.

I heard her storming up the steps, but she didn't turn toward my room. Instead, she made a beeline directly for her own room and slammed the door.

I rushed to her door, but paused before opening it. "Jennifer?" I called softly.

"Leave me alone!" she sobbed.

I didn't obey, of course. I slowly opened the door to see her lying on her bed, her face buried in a pillow. She was still wearing the sweater and skirt she had worn to school. If ever there was a vision of a lovely young teenage girl in emotional distress, it was Jennifer. I sat next to her on the bed and put a hand on her quaking body. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

I couldn't imagine myself talking to her this way just after we had met, but the image was too strong. I was her mother now, whether I liked it or not, and it hurt to see the girl I was rapidly beginning to think of as my own child crying so.

"Oh, Rachel," she sobbed again, "it's Barry!"

"Barry? What did Barry do?" I imagined the worst, but the answer was

almost laughable.

"He asked me out on a date!" she wailed. "And I thought he was my friend!"

"A date, eh?" I prompted, rubbing her back.

"Yes," she sniffed. "There's a dance at the Country Club Friday night. Barry's folks don't belong, but it's a dance honoring the basketball team, so they're all invited. Barry... Barry asked me to go with him!" Another sob heaved through her body.

"But why should that upset you?" I asked, truly puzzled.

"It means he thinks I'm a girl!" she moaned. "And I thought he was my friend! I knew I shouldn't have dressed in a skirt today!"

"You know," I told her, "if you lift up that skirt, I think you'll find you are a girl."

"Very funny."

I sighed, "Look, Jennifer, like it or not, you're a fourteen-year-old girl and Barry's a fourteen-year-old boy. Just because he does the normal thing and asks you out for a party doesn't mean you have to marry him. Friends date friends all the time."

At least the sobbing had stopped. Finally, she turned over and looked at me, her beautiful eyes red from crying. "Do you really think he's just asking me as a friend?"

"Of course," I assured her. "Why not just go to the party with him and have a good time?"

"But what if he tries to kiss me?"

"That's up to you. You're in control. If you don't want him to, tell him so. Didn't a girl ever tell you no?"

"Yes," she replied softly, "but lots of times, I didn't listen. I kissed her anyway."

So here was the real problem. She was afraid to be at the mercy of someone who was like her male self. This was the control issue that

the school psychologist had talked about. I knew there were men who wouldn't take no for an answer, but most would. From what she had told me about Barry, he wasn't the kind of boy to do anything she didn't want him to do.

"Do you think Barry would?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. He had a girlfriend when we were in college together, and he seemed to have a lot of respect for her. Come to think of it, I even look a little like his old girlfriend. He seems to be the same kind of guy now, just a little younger."

"So what did you tell him?"

She sighed, "I told him I'd think about it and tell him tomorrow evening before I go over to Sam's."

She had another boy on the hook? "Who is Sam?"

"Oh! I told you about her. Samantha Wallace. She's a friend of mine—an old friend, if you know what I mean. She was one of the guys who became girls who accepted it that I told you about. She's two years older than me. I mean, she's two years older than I am now. We used to be the same age. Damn! This gets so confusing sometimes."

"Why are you going to her house tomorrow?" I asked. I knew it was off the subject of Barry, but I wondered why Jennifer was suddenly developing girl friends. Not that I minded, I thought. It was just—what?—a mother's curiosity. I seemed to be falling into a 'mom' routine. I wondered why it was so easy for me.

"Sam has asked me to be one of the freshman representatives on the prom committee," Jennifer explained. Even though the tears hadn't quite dried, she managed an ironic smile. "Sam was so surprised to see me in a skirt today, I think she decided to work on me again before the mood went away. Working with her on the prom committee was the best way she could think of to do it since we don't have any classes together. See, she was one of the first to really accept what had happened to all of us. I mean, there she was one day, a football player with the girls hanging off of him. Then the next day, he's

Samantha Wallace and dating Danny Mitchell and everybody's vision of the girl next door."

"Gee," I mused, "I wonder why she accepted it so fast and it took others so long."

"Others like me?" To my relief, she was smiling as she asked.

I smiled back. "Well, I wouldn't want to mention any names."

She sighed, "I don't know, and I really don't think I've accepted it yet. I have to admit, though, it's been a big help talking to you, Rachel. I mean the way you've accepted it is... well, great."

I didn't know if I had really accepted it or not. I still had a long way to go before I considered myself to be Rachel Tilton, thirty-seven and female, but I knew I could do it. I guess it helped that I had been raised by my mother. I knew, as Jennifer didn't, that a woman could be strong. I watched my mother keep a roof over my head and food in my stomach all by herself, in spite of a limited education and a background of spousal abuse. If that wasn't strong, what was? I knew if she could see me, she'd be proud of what I was trying to do. I only hoped I was up to the task.

We gave each other a gentle hug, and to my relief, Jennifer headed off to bed with a confident smile on her face. I still didn't know what she would tell Barry the next day, but I knew that whatever she told him, she could be comfortable with the decision.

Charles was still in my room, only his coat and tie on the bed. There would be no sex tonight, I thought. The mood had been broken. Besides, Jennifer might pop in any minute. We didn't have to explain it to each other; we both knew our sexual reconciliation had been postponed. I just hoped I would be able to muster enough courage to go through with it the next time the opportunity presented itself.

"Well," Charles said, "I guess I'd better go back to my room."

"You don't have to go," I told him. "You could sleep here tonight." If he did, we might still be able to get back in the mood.

But he shook his head. "I'd better not. Not tonight. Besides, I have to

get up early tomorrow for another meeting, so I'll be up before you."

I tried a brave smile. "Come back any time, sailor."

He gave me a tired smile. Then, to my surprise, he bent over and kissed me gently but meaningfully on the mouth. Putting my arms around his neck, I returned the kiss, and to my bewilderment, I found that as good as the kiss was, I wanted more. I was still pondering that thought when I fell asleep twenty minutes later.

The house was quiet when I got up on Wednesday. Charles had already left for his early meeting and Jennifer had left for school. I looked outside. It was a beautiful morning, the skies blue and the sun bright, and as I opened the window, I smelled the brisk clean air which held a hint of spring. I felt good—perhaps better than I had felt in a long time. Sure, I was fifteen years older than I had been a few days before, but I was starting to learn that thirty-seven wasn't really very old at all. Maybe age was more in the mind than in the body.

I showered and dressed in a forest green suit and beige blouse for my meeting with Betty Vest. I was getting everything down to a routine, for even with all the new things I had to do to get ready as a woman, I found myself half an hour early for my appointment.

Capta College was pretty much what I expected it to be. It was a small, tree-lined campus with a collection of buildings which looked to have been built at least seventy five years ago. The Administration Building where Betty had her office was located near the center of the campus, right next to the library. Since I had a few minutes, I decided to check out the library.

Wichita State's library is pretty modern, but Capta's was quite old, though inside, it seemed to be fairly well stocked. On a whim, I decided to look in the mythology section. The Judge had godlike powers, so I thought I might find something on a god who resembled him. I know it sounded crazy to think of the Judge as a god, and I might have thought it was a terrific leap of logic, except for the fact that who but a god could have changed me into a woman and my brother into a steer with a wave of his hand and a few

incomprehensible words.

I didn't have to look long. I decided to start with something fairly familiar—the Greek and Roman gods. No sense in getting bogged down with Hindu or Norse gods. Those peoples had never had a poet named Ovid, but the Romans did. I only had a few minutes to read, but I scanned Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, Bullfinch's *Mythology*, and Graves' *Heroes of the Greeks and Romans*. Allowing myself five minutes to reach the Administration Building, I learned enough to be confident that I was dealing with the Roman gods. I thought I took the revelation calmly, but I guess when you wake up from a nap to discover you have breasts and a vagina, not much can shock you.

The Judge had to be Jupiter, the most powerful of the gods. Officer Mercer owed his ability to dodge bullets to his powers as Mercury, the messenger of the gods. Eric Vulman had to be Vulcan, and his wife, Grace, was the personification of the three Graces. Carolyn Miner was apparently Minerva, and the woman I was about to meet was probably Vesta.

The books weren't much help in learning about Betty Vest, though. It seemed although she was an important goddess, little was known about her. I would just have to get to know her the old-fashioned way.

Betty Vest's office was a stereotypical college executive's office. Oak panelling and thick carpets gave the room a warm, almost homey touch, and the large oak desk and tan leather chairs made it look almost like an English gentleman's club. It was no gentleman who sat behind the desk, though. Betty Vest rose and greeted me warmly. When I had been given a cup of coffee and her secretary departed, we got right down to business.

"I'm very pleased with the way you've adapted to Ovid," she told me.

"Did I have a choice?" I asked calmly.

She only smiled. "You were in the library a short time ago. I assume you know who we are. Don't worry, you can talk about us freely as long as we permit it."

I shifted in my chair, remembering at the last second to pull my skirt down. “Yes. It wasn’t that hard to figure out. But shouldn’t Minerva be in charge of the college?”

She shook her head. “No, she thought it was more important to be in charge of the public schools. Several of us have had to stretch our abilities to fit in our roles—not unlike the situation you’re faced with.”

“So the Judge assigned you a role, too?” I asked.

“No, not really. Jupiter counselled each of us as to which roles he felt would be best for us.”

“But why bother?” I asked. “What possible reason would the Gods of Olympus have for taking on roles in a small town in Oklahoma?”

“That will be discussed at the proper time, Rachel,” she replied. “Now, enough about us. I asked you to meet with me because I would like to offer you a job.”

“A job?” I asked, truly surprised. “What kind of a job could I possibly do for you?”

“I would like you to teach here at Capta. Of course, I would have to enhance your skills. I could easily give you the equivalent of a Masters in Psychology. Then you could teach for me. You would, of course become Rachel Tilton entirely.”

“I thought I was Rachel Tilton entirely,” I replied. What was she getting at?

She peered at me. “What about the part of you that is still Bobby Joe Malone?”

“What about it?”

“That part is making your task much more difficult.”

“But I’m learning to adjust,” I protested. “I’m trying to fit in as a woman. It’s just that it’s difficult sometimes.”

“Rachel,” she began, folding her hands and leaning forward toward me, “you have done an excellent job. We’re all proud of you. Most of

our changees who remember their past lives are given something a little closer in age than you were, and the ones with a drastic change in age are usually not saddled with a sex change as well. I talked to the Judge, and he agrees. If you allow us to change you completely, you will really be Rachel Tilton. You will have a past that you remember and which will serve you well in attempting to save your marriage. Without the change, you may lose in your efforts to keep Charles. We're proposing to do you a favor. You won't be like the Rachel Tilton who existed before you came to Ovid. You'll be a strong, confident Rachel Tilton."

"But what about the old me?" I asked. "You're proposing to make the old me go away completely."

She nodded. "That's true, but would that be so bad? Think of your situation if you lose Charles. There aren't many opportunities for a woman approaching middle age with no useable skills and a history of being an aimless drinker."

Is that how Rachel Tilton was really perceived? The Judge had changed me into this woman as a punishment. I suddenly realized that losing fifteen years wasn't my only penalty. He had intended that I be the weak Rachel Tilton, losing her husband and having no control over her daughter. What he hadn't reckoned with was my experience growing up as my mother's son. I knew what a strong woman could be like. I had a role model that served me well when my sex was changed. Now, my punishment wasn't any fun for them anymore. They knew even if I did lose Charles, I would find a way, just like my mother did. They couldn't stand that. It was time to erase all trace of Bobby Joe Malone and his mother's memory from Ovid. Well, it wasn't going to happen.

"I appreciate your offer," I said as calmly as I could, "but I must decline."

"Would you mind telling me why?" she asked quietly.

"Well, for one thing, Jennifer needs me. She can talk to me, but she couldn't talk to the Rachel Tilton you are proposing to turn me into," I

explained. “The other reason is that I am content to be who I am. I’ll admit I’m still not that comfortable with the idea of sex with Charles, but I’ll find a way. As Bobby Joe, I made a mistake. I should never have followed my brother, even at the risk of being shot. I ran away from who I really was, just to be safe. You’re offering me the same fate in a different package. Now, I can run away from who I really am—or have become—just to be safe. I can’t do it.”

To my surprise, she smiled. “You really are strong—stronger than I had imagined. I hope it works out for you, Rachel. I really do.”

She actually gave me a parting hug. I felt that she really respected my decision, but I wondered if the Judge would. I had no doubt that he could change me into the woman Betty Vest had proposed without my consent. I only hoped that he wouldn’t.

Before going back home, I decided to explore March’s Department Store. I had an idea for helping Jennifer, and March’s probably had a sporting goods section. I felt that one of the biggest reasons she was down on herself was that as a male, she had seen herself as an athlete. Even though she knew she’d never make the pros, there was a status to be gained from displaying athletic prowess. Now, as a weak girl, she felt that facet of her life, with all the status that implied, was gone. True, her football days were over, but there were other sports open to her. Women’s basketball was starting to take on a life of its own around the country. Schools which had mediocre men’s teams might suddenly rally behind a successful women’s team. In basketball, she might find at least part of that status she felt she had lost.

March’s Department Store was small by city standards. The Dillards in Towne East in Wichita could have swallowed up all three stories of it and had plenty of room left over. But the store was at least adequate. I had no trouble finding the small but relatively complete sporting goods section. Although there wasn’t a wide variety, there were two brands of basketballs to choose from.

“The Wilson is our best basketball,” a woman said from behind me. I turned, expecting to see the usual pert, young, and from her voice,

good-looking sporting goods clerk. Instead, I saw one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen in my life. If I were still male, I think I would have proposed to her on the spot. I could easily have lost myself in her deep blue eyes. Her hair was the color of spun gold, looking incredibly lush and warm even in the mediocre department store lights. She was perhaps five six and magnificently proportioned. She was wearing a conservative navy suit, but I noticed little about it, imagining the incredible body it did little to hide. A small store nametag identified her as Vera March.

“Uh, yes,” I managed. Good lord, I was a woman myself now, and yet I couldn’t help but think that I would give anything to make love to her, even without a penis. For her, I’d find a way. I felt less like a married woman and more like a young schoolboy. “I think I’ll take it.” I fumbled in my purse for my wallet.

Vera March gave an amused laugh, making it seem like the most romantic sound a woman could make. “I’ll just charge it to your account, Rachel. I realize you’re new at this, but you do have an account here.”

I stopped fumbling in my purse and looked at her amused face. “Then you know who I am? Who I was?”

“Of course,” she replied without elaborating.

The gods ran Ovid. As I recalled my mythology readings, the most beautiful of the gods was Venus. There could be no doubt that I was in the presence of the most beautiful goddess of them all. Where the Judge had an intimidating presence, and Betty Vest had an aura which made her seem like an old friend invited into my home, Vera March—Venus—exuded an aura of pure passion and desire. Whatever she asked of me, I would do.

“Before you go, though, I’d like to show you something new; it’s just arrived,” she said almost hypnotically.

“Surely,” I replied from a nearly dreamlike state, following her without question into the women’s department.

She gently pulled something small and pink from one of the racks. It was a baby-doll nightie, accented in white lace and sexy—the kind of nightie I had seen on the models in Playboy. “This would look terrific on you,” she told me. “You don’t even have to try it on. It’s a perfect fit.”

“Yes,” I agreed, not really understanding why.

“With these stockings and shoes,” she continued, pulling them seemingly out of the air, “Charles won’t be able to resist, will he?”

“No,” I said in rapt agreement.

I have never determined exactly what happened next. The next thing I remembered, I was sitting in my car, staring out into space. On the seat beside me were several March’s sacks. I examined them briefly, finding the baby doll that Vera March had shown me, as well as a garter belt, white stockings, and a pair of high-heeled shoes. The heels were four inches high, and I had no idea how I would ever balance on them. Well, I supposed I had managed on two- and three-inch heels. Four had to be the limit, though.

Oh, and the basketball was in its carton on the floor. I moved it to the trunk when I got home and dropped the other packages from March’s on my bed.

It was only noon, so I went made myself a quick lunch. I noticed as I ate my tuna on whole wheat, accompanied by a banana, that my eating habits were quickly changing, and it wasn’t just to avoid unknowingly finding part of Jimmy Ray on my plate. My new body actually craved foods that were good for me. Well, that was all right with me. If I had to be a woman, I planned to be a healthy woman.

I puttered around the house for most of the afternoon, peering out occasionally to make sure it was still sunny. I planned to take Jennifer over to a nearby park I had discovered and surprise her with the basketball that was now in my trunk.

She knew something was up when she walked in the door from school. She was wearing jeans, as was I. She was back to wearing

sneakers and a sweatshirt, but this time, I was actually glad. For that matter, I was wearing a similar outfit.

“Doing your Jennifer Tilton imitation?” she asked, looking at how I was dressed.

“It’s for a reason,” I told her, walking toward the garage. “Come on.”

She did, out of curiosity rather than obedience. We drove to the park where I pulled up to the curb and opened the trunk.

“Just what are you up to?” she asked, following me to the rear of the car.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I pulled the ball out of the trunk and threw it at her, yelling, “Think fast!”

She did. Two small, delicate hands wrapped themselves around as much basketball as possible. There was nothing wrong with her reflexes.

“Did you play basketball in high school or college?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Not me. I was too big and bulky for that.” Then she grinned. “I guess I don’t have that excuse anymore, do I?”

“I’m afraid not,” I replied. “How about a game of horse?”

Actually, we played four games before the February sun dropped so low in the sky that we were beginning to get cold, in spite of our physical activity. I won the first game, but I had played a little high school basketball. Even in my new oddly balanced body, I found I could make most of the basic shots without much trouble. It was an odd sensation to feel my breasts bounce with each shot. If I did this more regularly, I would have to invest in some sports bras.

Jennifer won the second game, but just barely. Then, after that, it was a walk away. Apparently, some of her old athletic talent had survived the sexual transition. By the fourth game, she was making shots I would have found difficult even if I had been in my old body.

“I’m impressed,” I told her, gasping for breath as she finished me off in the fourth game.

She wasn't even breathing hard. Of course, although we had started out in life as about the same age, she was now less than half my age.

"I thought age and treachery could beat out youth and talent any time," she chided me with a contented smile as she bounced the basketball as we walked.

"It can," I gasped. "I just wasn't feeling very treacherous today."

"You can't win them all."

"True," I agreed. "Now I'm too winded to fix dinner. You'll have to do it."

"Aha! Your treachery is returning," she observed.

I wasn't really joking. She had worn me out. I guessed losing fifteen years in an afternoon would do that to you. I still felt good, and I was beginning to realize that thirty-seven was still relatively young, but I didn't have nearly the stamina of the twenty-two year old man I had been.

We fixed dinner together, though. It was a simple meal of pre-packaged turkey breast with the usual quickie stuffing and cranberry sauce. I made a vegetable while Jennifer took care of the turkey. Charles would be home any time, I realized, unless he worked late, or whatever he did with little Courtney.

"You haven't asked about what I told Barry," Jennifer said while setting the table.

"I figured you'd tell me when you got ready," I explained without looking up from the green beans I was fixing. Actually, I was dying to know. There was no way I was going to be the prying mother, though.

"Well, I said yes."

She said it in a neutral tone. I think she knew I had wanted her to accept Barry's invitation, and I may have influenced her. What she was afraid of was that I would gush about her acceptance and become the matchmaking mother she had experienced before my arrival. I was determined not to do that, though, even though I was

pleased.

“Are you comfortable with that decision?” I asked nonchalantly.

“Not entirely,” she said truthfully, “but I guess I have to try sometime.”

I had never been around teenage girls much before my change, but I suspected that there were a lot of tomboys out there roughly Jennifer’s new age who had reacted to a boy who had been a friend suddenly asking them out on a date in the same way she had reacted. They didn’t have to experience a sex change to be confused by female hormones.

Before I could answer, we heard the garage door go up. Charles was on time! That meant he hadn’t stayed to work or to be with Courtney or for any other reason. I found myself being unexpectedly pleased by that.

We ate a stereotypically family meal that evening for the first time since my transformation. I found I actually enjoyed it. I was getting used to being Rachel Tilton, and a family dinner was part of the normalization process. I could see Jennifer felt it, too. She treated Charles as if she considered him her real father. He seemed to beam with pride when she told him about her day in school and the prom committee meeting she was getting ready to attend.

Charles told us about his day. It sounded as if it was both productive and interesting. The Navy was apparently sending someone to look over Vulman’s new product, but Charles could only speak of it in generalities since the government had already classified it. I hoped whoever the Navy sent was careful in Ovid. There was no telling what the Judge would do if the town allowed a stranger in who wasn’t under his control.

We had just finished dinner and the dishes when the doorbell rang. “Could somebody get that for me?” Jennifer asked, bolting up the stairs. “I need to get a jacket.”

Since Charles had already settled in his favorite chair to go through the day’s mail, I was elected. I opened the door to find a very

attractive girl of perhaps sixteen. Her hair was auburn and flowed in slight curls half way down her back. She was dressed in a sweater, jeans and sneakers, but she still managed to look very feminine.

"Hi, Mrs. Tilton," she said with a bright smile. "I'm Samantha Wallace, Jennifer's friend, but you're supposed to know me already."

"I'm pleased to meet you, even if I'm supposed to already know you," I returned.

"I offered to give Jennifer a ride over to my house because I wanted a minute to talk to you. I'm glad we're alone," she said. "Otherwise, we couldn't be talking about this. I just wanted to thank you for what you've done for Jake. I can't believe the change in him over the last couple of days."

"Jake?"

She blushed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't do that. Jake was Jennifer's old name. We were very good friends back in college, but she just couldn't accept her new life here until you came. I think you've given her a good role model."

"Well," I said modestly, "I've done what I could."

Jennifer shot down the stairs. "I'll be home by ten," she called over her shoulder.

As Samantha's car drove away, I realized now was my opportunity to seduce Charles, but I was having a hard time bringing myself to do it. As Charles puttered around in the family room, I found myself retreating upstairs. Maybe if I thought about it for a while, I told myself, I could work up the courage. The thought of having someone's penis thrust into my body was still difficult for me.

In my room, I decided to find a book to read. Maybe, I thought, that would relax me. But before I could find a book, I noticed the sacks from March's. I had absently dropped them beside the bed when I had gotten home for lunch. The sight of the sacks triggered something in my mind, and I found myself opening them, nearly in a trance.

I opened the sack with the baby-doll first. At a glance, it seemed

almost too small for me. It looked like just a handkerchief-sized piece of pink nylon accented with white lace. I held it up in front of me in the mirror and tried to imagine what it would look like on me. Without another thought, I found myself peeling off clothes and slipping the nightie on. It fit snugly, but it fit. I was amazed at the way it showed off my figure, accenting my significant breasts.

I slipped on the garter belt next, then slipped on the matching thong. As I slipped on the white stockings and attached them to the garter belt, it was as if I had done this all my life. It seemed natural and... right. I felt my nipples and crotch tingling at the feel of the material. My body wanted something, and my mind had been pushed aside to let the body have its way.

Finally, I put on the high heels I had bought. They were the highest I had ever worn, and I fully expected to fall over in them, but I wore them as naturally as if I had been wearing them my entire life.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I might have been thirty-seven, but I thought I looked much younger. My skin was smooth and my hair soft and shiny, and my figure betrayed little evidence of childbirth or the abuses of alcohol. I was thankful I had been placed in this role before the shade I had replaced had had a chance to wreck this body. If I had to have a word to describe what my new body was, that word would be desirable.

With a little kiss to the image in the mirror, I walked with purpose to the room where Charles sat, still going through the mail. He couldn't see me come up behind him, but he felt my touch when I put my hands around his shoulders and began rubbing his chest. He turned and looked up at me. I returned his look of surprise with one of adoration. It was as if this was the most natural thing in the world for me.

I know as I look back on that night that Vera March put a spell on me. What would have been more natural for the Goddess of Love? Believe me, it helped. I don't know if I could have gone through with it without that extra help.

That seems silly to me now, for I have learned to approach sex as a woman not with trepidation, but rather with joy. Charles was not the staid banker I had come to know over the last couple of days. Instead, he was a thoughtful and gentle lover. When Charles entered me, it felt different, of course. I was used to doing the entering. But the feeling of exhilaration was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. Charles was amazingly good at foreplay—much better than I had been as a man. Maybe that's one more reason why young women are attracted to older men. Too many young men know only how to please themselves, while older men have learned the extra pleasure to be obtained from pleasing their partners. In any case, by the time he actually entered me, I would have done anything for his love.

We managed a second time as well, and if anything, it was even better than the first. We fell asleep on my bed, his penis still in me. Well, I thought to myself as I drifted off into a euphoric sleep still warmed by not one, or two, but three orgasms, I had a penis again, all of my very own. It just didn't happen to be permanently attached to my body.

When I woke up, Charles was in the shower. My god! I realized I hadn't even heard Jennifer come in. What must she have thought? I was to find out soon. When I threw on a robe and went down to the kitchen to get a glass of juice, Jennifer was already there, a playful smile on her face.

"So you guys got it on last night," she said. It wasn't a question. I noted she was wearing a skirt, and a short one at that.

"Should I be parental and tell you it's none of your business, young lady?" I asked lightly, pouring a glass of juice for myself and sitting opposite her.

"So what was it like?"

"It was... different," I said, sort of staring out into space.

"Uh-oh," Jennifer muttered. "It sounds like you're getting into this."

"I might as well," I agreed. "It appears I'm stuck with it. I might as well

enjoy it.”

“But do you have to enjoy it so much?” she asked with mock innocence as she backed away from the table to get ready for school.

“I’ll see you tonight. And by the way, any problem with me inviting Barry over after dinner? He and I need to study for a math test.”

“So what made you decide to go out with him?” I asked.

“It appears I’m stuck with it,” she said parroting me. “I might as well enjoy it.”

“Just don’t enjoy it that way for a few years,” I warned her.

“No danger of that!” she said, laughing all the way to her room.

I was glad she had decided to go with Barry. It was a good sign that she was getting used to being a girl. I think she had really gotten used to it long before she knew me, but my acceptance of the new sex allowed her to do the same thing.

Charles was in a good mood, too. “I was surprised to find you up,” he said with a gentle kiss on my cheek. He was all ready for work in his banker blue pinstripe and conservative tie. It was hard to believe that just a few hours ago, this paragon of conservative businessmen and I had been rutting like wild animals on my bed.

“I decided mornings aren’t so bad after all,” I told him. “Do you want me to fix you some breakfast?”

He shook his head. “No, I’ll just get some cereal and juice. I have to watch my waistline.”

“And you have your dinner at the country club with the guys and your card game tonight,” I reminded him. Jennifer had briefed me on that. Every Thursday, Charles ate dinner and played cards with some of the other town movers and shakers.

“Not tonight,” he said. “I asked Tom Watson to sit in for me, so I’ll be home on time.”

He said it casually, but I knew there was more to it than he was letting on. He had said nothing about not going before. It was as if he had

planned something and was now going to cancel it. What was it? Probably an evening with Courtney. Did that mean I had won? I didn't really think so, but it was a step in the right direction.

Charles left for work, leaving me alone again in the house. I decided to make good use of my time. I spent the morning moving Charles' stuff back into my room. I was on the offensive, and I planned to make the most of it. It was time Charles and I slept in the same bed.

I was pleased with myself for getting the hang of this married woman role so quickly. I guess being a man before meant I had a better idea of what made guys tick. I knew that women faced with losing their husbands to another woman often withdrew from them, which made the problem even worse. I had just done to Charles the very thing that would have made my male self follow the girl who had done it anywhere. I had shown I was interested in him. With a little help from Vera's spell, the rest had been easy.

It was time for the next part of my plan. I called the bank late in the morning and asked for Charles. Judy answered the phone. "I thought I'd take Charles to lunch," I told her, "if he's not busy."

She caught my meaning. "Oh, he's not really busy at all, Mrs. Tilton. I'll tell him to meet you at the Greenhouse at noon. I'll make sure they keep a table for you."

"Thanks, Judy," I said. "I appreciate your help."

"And I yours, Mrs. Tilton," she said, hanging up.

I wondered if poor little Courtney knew she was losing ground. I needed to make sure. I decided to pick Charles up at the bank so Courtney could see the two of us together. According to the phone book, the Greenhouse was only a couple of blocks from the bank, and it was a beautiful early spring day in Ovid, so we could walk there from the bank.

I got to the bank about a quarter until noon. Charles was just getting ready to leave for lunch. Courtney was hovering in front of his office, ostensibly reviewing something with Judy. I breezed past them with a

friendly “Hi” and walked into Charles’ office. “Hello, darling!”

Before he could reply, I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him deeply, making sure I did it in sight of Courtney. Just for the fun of it, I even lifted one high heeled foot like they do in the movies. As Charles happily returned my kiss and hug, I could hear a small gasp from Courtney’s direction.

Lunch was fun. Charles was relaxed, and we talked about a number of things. He even blurted out, “You know, Rachel, suddenly you seem younger. You act more like you did when we were back in college.”

I smiled. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

He placed a hand over one of mine. “It was meant as a compliment. You know, we bankers are supposed to be serious people. But deep down, I really haven’t changed since college. Remember when you and I made love in the library?”

“Who could forget?” I said with a giggle. Of course, it was just acting. I didn’t have Rachel’s college memories. But it was interesting to learn that Charles wasn’t really a stuffy banker after all. As we talked more, I realized who he was—or given the nature of Ovid, who he thought he was. He was a third generation bank president, running the bank founded by his grandfather. He never really wanted to go into the banking business. He had really wanted to be a history teacher, but his father gave him no options. That’s why he worked so hard. He tried to make up in effort what he lacked in interest.

I learned more about Rachel, too. She was a college sweetheart, and the more Charles talked, the more I realized they were supposed to have been a fun-loving couple. She had followed him back to Ovid as his wife, but quickly became bored with Ovid and, since he was a part of Ovid, bored with Charles. I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that Rachel had had an affair or two on her own. I hoped I never found out, either. Thank god her drinking problem was a relatively new one. It had kept her from ruining a body that I was beginning to appreciate more with each passing day.

We embraced and kissed in the lobby of the bank before going our

separate ways. I took a moment to look around the lobby. As hoped, there was a frown on Courtney's face and a smile on Judy's.

I spent the rest of the day walking down Main Street, greeting people I was supposed to know and just looking in the windows. I actually did see two people I knew. The first was Grace, who was hurrying back to her shop from lunch. She smiled and waved at me. The second was the Judge. He had just parked his large white Lincoln in front of March's. He greeted me with a slight nod of his head, just saying, "Rachel."

"Judge," I returned with equal reserve, and we went our separate ways. The less I had to do with the Judge, the better I liked it, I thought.

After dinner, Charles and I settled in to watch a movie on TV. Jennifer had taken Barry to the kitchen, where the two of them were studying for a math quiz.

"That Barry seems to be a good kid," Charles remarked as we snuggled together on the couch. We had decided to watch *The Sting* on cable. It was a movie we were supposed to have watched in the theaters when we were in high school. I had seen it, but it played in the theaters about the time my male self had been born.

"He is a good kid," I agreed. Alone with Barry in the kitchen earlier, he and I had had a chance to talk about Jennifer's acceptance of his date. He admitted to me that had long forgotten Jennifer's male self, and was infatuated with the young woman she had become. It had taken a lot of nerve on his part to ask her out, knowing that it could have ended their friendship as well. I told him I was glad he had taken the chance.

Charles and I headed upstairs after the movie, leaving the family room to Jennifer and Barry, who had just finished studying. While the two of them watched a movie, Charles and I quietly closed our door and went to bed together, but for about an hour, we didn't get any sleep. Sex as a woman was getting to be habit forming.

“I haven’t got a thing to wear!” Jennifer’s voice carried all the way down the hall from her room. I opened my eyes. Charles had another early morning meeting, so Jennifer and I were alone in the house. She came rushing into my room and repeated, “I haven’t got a thing to wear!”

“Do you have any idea how feminine that sounds?” I asked her sleepily.

“But Rachel, I looked in my closet. I just assumed there would be a party dress there—something I could wear tonight.”

“There isn’t?”

“Nothing like any of the other girls are wearing. They’re all going to wear something short and sexy. I mean, I don’t really want to look that sexy, but I’d like to fit in.”

I could see her point. High schoolers were very conformist. If she wasn’t wearing the same type of outfit as the other girls, she would be viewed as not one of them. For the first time since her change, it was becoming important to her to be just like them.

“I’ll call Grace Vulman and see if she had something for you. I’ll pick you up after school and we can go get it,” I told her. I thought I’d give Grace’s shop a try. Given what Vera March had done to me, I didn’t think I wanted some sort of love spell cast over Jennifer, so March’s was out.

I got a hug for my efforts. “Thanks, Mom!” she gushed. Then, she broke the hug and looked at me wide eyed. “I’m sorry, Rachel, that just kind of slipped out.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I told her with a smile. “To be honest, I kind of liked it.”

The grin was back. “Okay... Mom!”

A call to Grace after the stores were open confirmed that she had a nice selection for Jennifer. I was sure she did. Grace was not in the same league with the Judge, I knew, or even her husband from what I had been able to read. She was certainly one of the Graces, or maybe

all of them in one body. The three Graces of mythology were supposedly inseparable.

After school, as promised, I picked Jennifer up, and we were off to Grace's shop. Like most of the businesses in Ovid, it was on Main Street, just a block up from the bank. A tasteful sign in front said simply 'Grace's Fashions.'

"Are you sure about this?" Jennifer asked. "I hear this shop is pretty expensive."

"Let's see what they've got," I replied. It would be worth the price to avoid Vera March's spells.

Grace was pleased to see me, but she seemed particularly pleased to see Jennifer. As I had hoped, she had just the thing for her. It was black and actually crocheted with a scooped neckline that was revealing without being too revealing. Jennifer rushed to try it on.

"I can hardly believe the progress you've made with her," Grace remarked when we were alone. "I could have never imagined her in here trying on a dress like that before you became Rachel."

"I think she was just tired of fighting it," I told Grace.

"But you didn't fight it," she noted.

"No, but after the escapade with my brother, I think I was just happy to be alive and free, even if I had to be an older woman to do it. Besides, I get the idea that I didn't have a choice."

"You could have been a different Rachel, though. I would guess that you could have gotten by without turning into a proper wife and mother."

"I suppose," I said, "but Jennifer quickly became a friend. I didn't want to see her hurt. Maybe that's what motherhood is really all about. Mothers and daughters should be friends."

Before Grace could reply, Jennifer was back in the room. Even without heels or accessories, the dress looked perfect on her. She was a lovely young woman, and from the expression on her face, I could see

she was proud of the fact. We ended up buying the dress, dark hose to go with it, and a pair of pumps with a two-inch heel. On the way out, Jennifer spotted a necklace that went with it, so before we left, we had added that and a matching bracelet and earrings.

“Not bad for somebody who didn’t even want to be a girl,” I commented on the drive home.

“If I’m gonna do it, I’m gonna do it right,” she said with a grin.

She did it right. When Jennifer came down the stairs to meet Barry for her date, no one would have ever dreamed that she had once been a beefy lineman on a college football team. She moved with an almost supernatural grace, but of course, given Ovid’s background, that probably wasn’t very unusual. She still had some filling out to do, but the girl in the short black dress showed more than a hint of what she would be in just a few more years. The look on her face was the look of a girl who was proud to be beautiful. She had come so far in the few days that I had known her. I was proud to be her mother, for that’s what I had become.

As we watched Jennifer take Barry’s arm, I suddenly realized that only Charles didn’t realize the magnitude of this moment. Yet even he was pleased. In his mind, changed by his transformation in Ovid, he was a concerned father who had suddenly watched his tomboy daughter emerge into a beautiful young woman. I suppose his joy at her psychological transformation was none less than mine or Barry’s—or Jennifer’s for that matter.

Charles and I had our own party while Jennifer was at the dance. Every time I made love with Charles, I began to feel a little more comfortable in my new role. I was actually enjoying being a woman. Now, if I could just eliminate the Courtney problem, life would be a dream.

Charles had gone to bed (still my bed) by eleven, but I had stayed up, sitting in the den in my robe with a book, waiting for Jennifer to come home. I suppose it was a natural thing for a mother to do. I remembered my own mother staying up to be there when I got home

from a party. Even more importantly, I wasn't sure what would happen to Jennifer. Her female persona was still fragile, and I had not had the chance to talk to Barry alone to determine what kind of a boy he was. If he tried to push Jennifer too quickly, she could easily return to fighting her sex.

Jennifer had told me that Samantha Wallace and her boyfriend would bring her home. I didn't know Samantha's boyfriend, but I trusted her, so I was sure it was all right. It would be interesting to be in the car with them. Since according to Jennifer, only two transformed people could discuss their changes, the four of them in the car would be limited in what they could say or do. Yet all four of them had been football teammates at one time. Here they were, still friends, but the social dynamics had changed so much.

I heard a car pull up in front of the house at eleven fifteen. There was suddenly the sound of high heels clapping on the sidewalk to the front door, and a girlish giggle followed by a lower male chuckle. Then, there was silence. I could still hear the car engine idling, but there was no sound at the front door. What was going on? I wondered. Then, I heard a feminine "G'nite" followed by a male one, and the front door opened.

She seemed surprised but pleased to find me up. "Hi, Mom." The title came naturally to her now. "Why are you still up?"

I smiled at her. "I think you know why."

"Worried about me?"

"Concerned."

She sat next to me, not bothering to pull the dress down to cover her magnificent legs. "It was fun."

"Just fun?"

"Okay," she allowed, "it was great. Barry was... different. I mean, I still felt like he was my friend, but it was as if he was more than that. Does that make any sense?"

Actually, it did. I was beginning to feel that way about Charles. Maybe

that was what a successful marriage was all about. To be a successful wife, you had to be a lover and a friend. "Yes, it does," I replied knowingly.

"Well, anyway, he asked me to go to the movies with him tomorrow night, so you and Dad can have the house to yourselves again."

So it was 'Dad' now as well.

I gave her a hug. "I'm glad you had a good time," I told her truthfully.

"I did," she replied, just a little dreamily.

I went to bed feeling very confident. One of the two problems threatening to pull my adopted family together had been solved. Now, if I could just solve the other one.

I woke the next morning to the sound of the phone ringing. I looked at the clock. It was eight. Who in their right mind would call at eight o'clock on Saturday? As I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, I could hear Jennifer rushing to the ringing phone. I heard her pick it up and say expectantly, "Hello?" This was followed by some unintelligible words and a couple of very feminine giggles. Then I heard her say, "Bye!"

Within moments, Jennifer was in my room. She gave me a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Good morning, Mom!"

"What are you so happy about?" I asked.

"That was Barry. He wants to hang out with me downtown this morning."

I found myself suddenly thankful that Ovid was too small to have a mall. Downtown Ovid was still a little brisk in February to encourage much 'hanging out.' Still, I was glad to see her acting normally.

"So what time?"

"About ten. Can you drive me down to meet him? He wants to meet at Porter's," she pleaded.

"What is Porter's?" I asked, getting up out of bed and slipping on a

robe.

"It's a drug store, only they never took out the soda fountain. You can even get lunch there. It's like something out of the Twilight Zone," she explained.

"Show me something in Ovid that isn't out of the Twilight Zone," I pointed out.

"That's for sure," she said, "but at least this is one of the happy Twilight Zone episodes."

Unless you're a steer waiting for the slaughter house, I thought to myself. Well, Jimmy Ray had brought it on himself. Maybe all of us in Ovid brought our fates on ourselves. Some of those fates were just more pleasant than others.

"Okay. Let's get a bite of breakfast and I'll take you downtown."

We ate lightly. Jennifer expected to join Barry in a soda, and I was going to try to talk Charles into taking me to lunch. Every hour I had him away from Courtney was a little victory. I dropped Jennifer off at Porter's, parked the car closer to the bank, and entered the bank. It had been exactly one week since Jimmy Ray and I had strode into the bank to rob it. Now, here I was going into the bank again, only as a very different person, complete with a dress and nylons and high heels. It was a little overkill for Saturday, but I wanted to look good when I was standing next to Courtney.

I looked out at the curb. There was a large white Lincoln that looked like the Judge's car parked just where Enos had parked Old Snow the week before. I wondered if he had gotten away, or if Officer Mercer had captured him later and taken him before the Judge. If that had happened, he might be anyone or anything in Ovid. He might not even remember being Enos. I secretly hoped he had gotten away. Otherwise, he might be out in a pasture munching grass with my brother.

Charles was out on the bank floor and had just finished talking to a customer. "Rachel! What are you doing downtown this morning?"

“I had to drop Jennifer off to meet Barry,” I told him honestly while giving him a kiss.

“It’s a little early, but did you want to stay for lunch?” he asked. My thought exactly!

“I’d love to,” I replied, looking around for Courtney. I was disappointed that she was nowhere to be found. It took the triumph away of taking Charles to lunch. Saturday looked like a short staff, though, so maybe she was off. I couldn’t leave it at that, though. I had to ask, “Where’s Courtney today?”

“She’s no longer with the bank,” Charles said very matter-of-factly.

“What? I thought you thought very highly of her.”

Charles shrugged. “She was all right, but yesterday, she came to me with an ultimatum. She demanded Judy Cartwright’s job. Can you imagine? Judy had been with the bank eight years and is doing a terrific job. I couldn’t run the bank without her. I thought Courtney was happy as a teller. She wasn’t ready for a promotion.”

I wondered if she would have been considered ready for a promotion if I hadn’t brought Charles back to his family. I suppose it was possible that there never was anything between Charles and Courtney. Maybe I was just being paranoid. Maybe I had nipped the relationship in the bud before it had gotten out of hand. In any case, Courtney had overplayed whatever hand she had been holding, and now she was gone. I had won!

I agreed to go shopping for an hour or so and meet Charles back at the bank for lunch. Lunch would be a victory celebration, but Charles would never know it. I also knew that I had won only a battle and not the war. I knew it wasn’t enough to just be Charles’ wife. I would have to be his lover as well. Oh well, I thought to myself with a smile, it was just something I’d have to put up with. It was a good thing sex was so much fun.

I was thinking about getting something slinky for our night together and wasn’t watching where I was going when I reached the street. As

a result, I almost ran into the Judge who was just coming in the bank. To my amazement, this wasn't the stern Judge who had sentenced me to a life as Rachel Tilton. He was actually smiling as he gave me a slight nod of his head. "And how are you today, Rachel? Is everything going well?"

"Very well, Judge," I replied coolly.

"I'm pleased," he said. Then, before I could respond, he put up his hand for me to be silent. "I know, you think I changed you so you would fail as Rachel. That was a possibility, but I'm glad you didn't fail. That's why I changed you into someone who could use your strengths and not be hampered by your weaknesses. Consider it a second chance."

"You know everything that's happened to me, don't you?" I asked, knowing the answer.

He nodded. "Yes, and I know everything that would have happened to you had I not intervened. I am, in fact, your friend, Rachel, in spite of what you think."

I was puzzled. "What do you mean when you say you know what would have happened to me?"

He shook his head with a slight smile. "Now, that's not something you really need to know, is it, Rachel?"

I supposed he was right. I was happy the way I was. Why worry about could have beens?

"Can I offer you a ride?" he asked, motioning to his car.

"No, thanks. I'm parked just a block away," I replied. Then, with a smile of my own, I added, "Besides, a woman my age needs the exercise."

"Then have a pleasant weekend," he said, opening his car door and stepping in.

"I will," I promised, meaning it.

As he drove away, I did a double take. Just for a moment, I thought it

was an older model Dodge pulling away from the curb instead of the Judge's Lincoln. And inside the car, I could have sworn it was a tough looking black man who waved at me instead of the Judge.

But that couldn't have been, could it?

I blinked and was back in Susan's office again as Susan and Diana stared at me.

"Wow!" Susan suddenly said. "It was as if I had really experienced everything Rachel Tilton did. It's weird to see myself through someone else's eyes. Do I really crinkle my nose like that in court?"

"You do," I told her, "but keep it up. It's cute, and I think the Judge likes it."

Diana laughed, "You two had better both be glad he's changed his tune over the last few centuries. There was a time when that old reprobate would have had both of you in bed at the same time for intentionally doing something cute in front of him."

"The thing I don't understand," Susan said, "is if the Judge was Enos, why didn't he stop Jimmy Ray before he picked up his brother? As Enos, he was an additional intimidating factor. Bobby Joe might have been able to get away from his brother, but it was two against one when you consider Enos."

"Because," Diana said, "it was Bobby Joe that the Judge really wanted. Jimmy Ray wasn't suitable material for Ovid. That's why he's out in the south forty waiting for the butcher's cleaver right now. And in case you haven't figured it out, he only takes people when their lives are nearly at an end. And only people with real potential get to keep their memories. That isn't random. Bobby Joe had been raised by his mother. Even though he was as male as male could be, he had a female role model he could easily emulate. The Judge knew that once Jimmy Ray hooked up with Bobby Joe, they were both going to be killed. If Enos hadn't caused them to drive to Ovid, they would have gone directly to Tulsa where they would have been killed in the next

robbery, along with two innocent bystanders.”

“Okay,” Susan said slowly. “I think I understand.”

I realized what she was really coming to understand was that her old male body would not have survived much longer if she hadn’t been lured to Ovid.

Susan continued, “But if the Judge had already decided what to do with Bobby Joe, why did he order me to defend him? It seems like it was a waste of everyone’s time.”

“Who knows?” Diana shrugged. “Maybe he wanted it to look like a real trial. Or maybe he wanted to make sure about Bobby Joe. If you argued eloquently enough for him, the Judge would know he had the right man to be Rachel.”

“Is that what he’s using me for?” Susan wanted to know.

“Sometimes,” Diana admitted.

“So what about Courtney?” I asked. “Was Charles really having an affair?”

“Yeah,” Susan chimed in. “Was he, or was that just Rachel being paranoid?”

Diana rolled her eyes and sighed, “Spoken like former men.”

Susan and I both blushed.

“Look,” Diana said, pouring herself more wine, “all men are vulnerable to the lure of a sweet young thing who tells them how wonderful they are. If they weren’t having one, they would have had one shortly. The only thing that matters is that sooner or later, Courtney would have won. The old Rachel forgot that wives should be lovers, too.”

“Like the old song,” Susan offered.

“What old song?” I asked.

“You’re too young,” Diana said to me. Then, turning to Susan, she sang, “Hey little girl, comb your hair, fix your makeup. Soon, he will open the door.”

Susan got into the spirit of thing by singing back, "Don't think because there's a ring on your finger, you needn't try anymore."

"It's an old Jack Jones song," Diana explained. "It's older than your old self was."

Together, pointing at me, they sang, "For wives should always be lovers, too. Run to his arms the moment he comes home to you." Then, they both broke out laughing. I joined them in their laughter.

Finally, I asked, "So what happened to Courtney?"

"Oh," Diana said dismissively, "she got a job as a checkout clerk at a supermarket."

My heart leaped into my throat. "She's working at Duggan's, isn't she?" That was the store my husband managed.

"I think so," Diana said slowly, unable to hide an impish smile.

"Okay," I said, putting down my wine glass and grabbing my purse. "Let's go."

"Go where?" Susan asked.

"We were going to March's, remember?" I replied. "I want to see if Vera has any more of those baby dolls left!"

Ovid V: The Jet Jockey

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It was a pleasant spring Saturday in Ovid. The sun was shining and the temperature was nearing seventy. Jerry and I had decided to make it a lazy day at the Patton household, letting the kids watch TV and play while he and I puttered at various small projects around the house. Jerry fertilized the yard, stopping at least twice for another beer. I did a little ironing and sewed a couple of missing buttons on the kids' shirts. All in all, it was just another domestic weekend in small town America. The only thing that made it a little unusual is that about six months earlier, all the members of the Patton family had been fraternity brothers at Notre Dame.

I was the only one in the family who knew this. My husband, Jerry, thought he had always been Jerry Patton, currently the manager of Duggan's IGA out on the edge of town. The twins, Mike and Michelle, were nearly seven, and they were as normal as kids could be. Me? I knew what had happened to us. I knew we had been turned into a model Midwestern family. I knew my sex had been changed. But you know what? I didn't care anymore. It was a good life. Jerry and I both had good jobs, the sex was surprisingly great, and I wouldn't have changed any of it for the world.

Jerry was in the den with the kids watching something on TV when the doorbell rang. Since I was on my feet and closest to the front door, I answered it. At the door was a woman I had never seen before, but I knew her instantly. She was a tall blonde, her hair cut in a pageboy style. She had fair skin and Nordic features. She was wearing a pair of denim shorts and sandals which displayed incredible legs. Her top was a white knit, showing off a set of perfect breasts. I found myself envying her. I was dressed about the same, but next to her, I looked like a boy. I should point out that in reality, I looked nothing like a boy.

"And your name is?" I asked, knowing that she would have a new

one.

“Diane Mane,” she responded with a smile. “Goddag.”

“Goddag?”

“Swedish for hello,” she explained.

“Aren’t you a little out of your territory?” I asked. After all, Diana—or Diane as she now called herself—was one of the gods from Greek and Roman mythology, not Norse.

“I don’t think anyone will mind,” she said with a smile. Then, looking me over, she added, “Nice outfit. You look like one hot babe.”

“So do you,” I laughed. “Come on in.”

We holed up in the kitchen, the rest of my family oblivious to our conversation. I had a hunch Diane had something to do with that, but I didn’t ask. I fixed us each a glass of lemonade and sat down at the kitchen table with her.

“So what brings you here?” I asked. “I thought you usually left town for the weekend.”

“Usually,” she agreed, “but something interesting just happened and I wanted to see it while the story was fresh.”

I knew the story she meant. I was the repository of the stories of Ovid’s newest citizens, and already four of the major gods, the only ones who were allowed to see the stories, had come to see me about it. After all, it was really several days old. I didn’t tell Diane that, though. She would have been heartbroken to learn that some of the other gods had seen the story first.

“Which story?” I asked innocently.

She sighed, “You’ve been a girl too long. You’ve learned how to be coy.”

I smiled, “Do you think so?” I batted my eyelashes for good measure.

“Do I get to see the story, or do I have to turn you into a toad?”

“Well, since you put it that way,” I replied and went into my trance...

A casual observer, walking along the cloud tops, would have been startled as three silver arrows burst through the fleecy layer on a course that would seem to take them straight into the sun. The triple blast of explosive exhaust cracked across the sky, mixed with the air itself, compressed and pushed aside by the supersonic speed of the three arrows. When he had regained his composure, the observer would have seen the three arrows for what they were—F18 Hornets streaking to their assigned altitude on patrol.

Of course, there was no observer walking casually through the clouds, although I almost imagined one being there. Instead, there were only the six of us who manned the fighters, and we were too busy doing our assigned duties to appreciate the aesthetics of our situation. Flying a jet fighter is a dangerous business, requiring all of the pilot's skill and attention. A mistake at supersonic speeds can cost the loss of a multimillion-dollar aircraft and, more importantly, the lives of the two pilots.

We were on patrol over the Gulf, three powerful warbirds that could carry enough firepower to sweep any known enemy from the skies. Our task was to enforce the 'No Fly' zones in southern Iraq. Our standing orders were to use whatever force was necessary to maintain absolute control of the skies. We took our jobs seriously.

"Boxer One, Control," a voice barked in my ear.

"Boxer One, aye," I responded. That was my designation for the mission. I was in the lead aircraft, Boxer Two off my left wing and Boxer Three off my right.

"Bogey bearing two niner five at twenty six. Range two hundred, speed four four oh. Do you copy?"

"We copy," I replied to the voice. Control was an E-2C Hawkeye off the Eisenhower with AWACS capability. The incredibly powerful radars she sported could have probably picked up a paper airplane sailed out of the window of the Defense Ministry in Baghdad. I reported our actions to Control as I gave the order to my patrol to turn

to meet the threat. Battle was imminent. At our speeds, we would be on top of each other before...

"Boxer One, break off and return to base. Boxer Two, you have con."

I was being told to turn tail and run, leaving my two wingmen to face the threat. That didn't seem possible. "Repeat, Control!"

"Break off now, Boxer One! Return to base."

The real world isn't like Tom Cruise in Top Gun. You don't say, 'The hell with orders,' and go blazing into combat if you ever want to sit in the cockpit again. "Boxer One, aye. Breaking off."

I did allow myself one private message, though. I called Boxer Two and Three to wish them luck.

"What's going on, Rich?" Terry Brooks asked through the intercom from the seat behind me.

"You've got me, Terry," I grumbled. This was it, my first chance at actual combat. I had paid my dues, damn it! What the hell was going on? I needed to be tested. I needed the combat experience if I was ever going to achieve my goals.

My goals, I thought. My goals had begun to come into focus when I was ten years old back home in the Boston suburbs. Dad took my two brothers and me to an air show. The featured activity of the day was a performance by the Blue Angels, the Navy's crack precision aviation team. I stood there on the hot tarmac with thousands of other people, my mouth open in awe as the best pilots in the world thrilled us with seemingly impossible stunts in the skies above. I knew at that moment that I wanted to fly. I wanted it more than I had ever wanted anything else in my life. I was going to fly or know the reason why.

I studied my ass off in school. Math wasn't easy for me, but I knew I'd have to get good at it if I ever wanted to be in a military cockpit. By high school, I was an A math student, as well as in all my other classes as well. Good grades alone wouldn't get me where I wanted to go, though. My family lived in a small town in Massachusetts, so I had plenty of opportunities for extracurricular activities. I made the football

team, starting by my sophomore year as a tight end. I made the basketball squad, too, although even my slim six two frame wasn't enough to get me on the starting squad. When it came to track, though, I could run like the wind, setting two conference records and coming within four seconds in the 5k of breaking the state record.

I found time to be popular, too. I was on class council every year, and my senior year, I was Vice President of the student body. So there I was, smart, popular, and athletic, so needless to say, I enjoyed a successful social life as well. There weren't too many girls in high school who wouldn't have liked to land me right out of high school, but as much as I enjoyed them, I had no plans to marry for at least four years.

Why four years? Because that's how long it would take me to get through the Naval Academy. I don't think Dad ever figured out why I would want to go to the Naval Academy. He had been an engineer in the high-tech industry for his entire adult life, and he told me that with my abilities, I could make big bucks doing the same thing. Besides, he told me, he and my mother could afford to send me to college. I didn't need the free ride at Annapolis to get a good education. I knew that, but I knew what I wanted. My acceptance at the Naval Academy would put me on the fast track for that jet I had wanted since I was ten. No amount of money would make up for losing that.

Four years at Annapolis can be hard on the best of men and women. You're surrounded by young people who are every bit as smart and motivated as you are. When you graduate, you're given more responsibility right out of school than many of your civilian counterparts garner in a lifetime. But I thrived on the competition. I didn't make Battalion Commander, but I spent time as both a Company Commander and a member of Battalion Staff. I was in the top ten percent of my graduating class. Of course, I requested Aviation.

My record continued throughout Flight School, and when I made it to my first squadron, I had already been identified as an up and comer. Squadron COs shoved as much work my way as they could, knowing I

would do whatever it took to reach the top. To me, the top was eventually to have my own squadron. No goal above that seemed worth the price. As a squadron CO, I would still spend time in the air. Above that, it would all be paperwork. Why make Admiral when you have to stay on the ground?

As my plane made its lonely way back to the carrier, I realized that I had just experienced the biggest setback of my military life. Combat missions were rare, even in the Gulf. In the air, Iraq was like a mosquito. It could irritate you, even make you bleed, but in the final round, it would be squashed flat. The Iraqi leadership knew that, too, so there weren't many challenges to US air power. Now, I had missed my chance at one of those challenges. I might never get another one. With combat under my belt, I would stand ahead of my compatriots when selection for further responsibility came along. On that day in the future when I stood for squadron CO, I might lose out to a man no better qualified, but with combat experience. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

I had to take my mind off my problems, though. Down below, there was an aircraft carrier, and the most dangerous part of a mission was still ahead of me—the landing. Even experienced pilots in the other services cringe at the thought of what a Navy pilot goes through to land a plane on a carrier deck. An Air Force pilot lands his aircraft on a strip of concrete approximately a hundred feet wide and a couple of miles long. A Navy pilot doesn't really land his plane. He actually initiates a 'controlled crash' on a forty foot by sixty foot section of metal deck which is pitching and rolling with the motion of the sea. To make it even more fun, your tailhook has to catch one of four steel cables called 'wires' which will reduce your landing speed from about a hundred and seventy knots to zero in a little over two seconds.

I was on final, listening to the LSO—the Landing Systems Officer—give me commands while I watched the 'meatball,' a lighted optical device which showed me exactly where my plane was in relation to the moving deck. Seas were calm and winds light as I brought my plane in toward the deck. It looked to be a textbook landing, but I was still

ready to throw on the afterburners if I missed any of the wires. I didn't have to throw them on, though, for the landing was a pretty one, catching the number three wire like something out of a Pensacola training film. The powerful fighter came to a smooth but abrupt halt, and I powered back to taxi in.

"Short hop," my Crew Chief yelled over the noises on the carrier deck as I scrambled down the ladder.

"What's going on?" I yelled back when I was on the deck. "Why did they recall us?"

The Crew Chief shrugged casually. Contrary to what many non-military people think, there is a lot of mutual respect between pilots and their enlisted ground crews. They're part of a team, so there's not a lot of time for excessive military formality. "Don't know, sir. The skipper doesn't always consult with me. He's waiting for you in the forward ready room."

When he spoke of the skipper, he was not referring to the ship's captain. Rather, he was talking about Commander Murchison, our Squadron Commander.

"We're on our way," I said, motioning for Terry to follow.

"No, sir," the Crew Chief said. "He wants to see you alone. Mr. Brooks isn't invited."

My stomach dropped a few thousand feet. Why would the skipper call me back from a mission just to talk to me privately? What was so important that it wouldn't wait until we got back from the mission? Whatever it was, I had a feeling I wasn't going to like it.

The skipper was, as promised, in the ready room. I was happy to see he looked relaxed. Whatever was up wasn't bad or he would have been standing. Instead, he was seated in one of the high-backed chairs, reading what appeared to be a set of orders. He looked up when he saw me at the door and said, "Come on in, Rich."

I was still in my flight suit, but he didn't comment on my recall. He got right down to business before I could ask any questions. "You're being

reassigned, Rich.”

“Reassigned?” I asked. The squadron was a three-year tour, and I had only been on board for eighteen months. “What’s going on, Skipper? Why call me back from a mission just to tell me I have orders eighteen months early?”

“Because we were told to,” he replied, handing me the orders, “by your new boss.”

I looked at the orders. Cutting through the bureaucratic double talk on the orders, I saw the key sentence: “You are ordered to report to NAVINTEL Code 146 by 0730...”

I looked at the date. “That’s tomorrow.”

He nodded. “Your bags have been packed for you and the COD is waiting.” COD stood for Carrier Onboard Delivery. It was a C-2 aircraft that ferried men and material out to the ship from a shore base.

“Sir, I know what NAVINTEL is. That’s Naval Intelligence, but what is Code 146? I thought all the code designations were two digits.”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he said. “Now, you had better get up on deck. As soon as you get ashore, there’s a plane waiting to take you to Washington.” He handed me my orders and stuck out his hand. “I hate to lose you, Rich. You’re one hell of a fine officer. If I can ever help you, let me know.”

I accepted his hand. “Thank you, sir.”

Fifteen minutes later, I was shot off the deck of the carrier as a passenger on the COD. It felt odd to leave my ship that way. In the COD, you’re strapped in facing backwards, so the catapult shot throws your body into the crossed straps rather than pushing you back in your seat.

I was the only passenger, so I had some time to think. I wasn’t an Intel officer, so why in hell was I being ordered to an Intel unit? Were they going to park me at some little cubicle in the Pentagon? I shuddered at the thought. Navy captains were a dime a dozen at the Pentagon where only an admiral had any real status. Lieutenants like me? They

kept us around to shine shoes and open doors. This wasn't going to be a good way to get my ticket punched for squadron commander.

I changed my mind a little when we landed. The plane waiting for me was a Navy C-9, the Navy version of the DC-9. I was being ferried to Rome where I would be sent to Washington on a commercial airliner. Again, I was the only passenger on a special flight. What was so important about me that I rated air service normally reserved for an admiral?

In Rome, something even more remarkable happened. Now dressed in my dress blues, I was ushered by two civilian security guards to a waiting TWA flight bound for Washington. One of the security guards handed the flight attendant at the gate my ticket and boarding pass. She looked at me, obviously surprised. "Someone must think you're pretty important, Lieutenant," she remarked.

"You mean the guards?" I asked, nodding toward the two departing security men.

She smiled. "That and the fact that we've had to delay our departure for thirty minutes waiting for you."

It was one thing to have Navy aircraft standing by for my use, but it was quite another thing to delay the departure of a commercial airliner. Who was my new boss? I wondered, and why did he have so much clout? Code 146 must be one of the most important departments in Washington, I thought.

To my continued amazement, my seat was in First Class. Several passengers gave me curious looks obviously wondering how a lowly junior officer rated such treatment. I wanted to tell them that I wondered myself, but I just quietly settled in, ordered a drink, and slipped on a set of earphones to listen to music. After a sumptuous dinner—probably the best I had ever had in the air—I settled down as the skies darkened and got as much sleep as I could. I had to report first thing in the morning. It was going to be a busy day.

We touched down at Dulles at a quarter after six the next morning. Fortunately, I had had the chance to shave and wash up a bit, but my

shirt was looking a little wilted after the transoceanic flight. It would have to do, I realized as I got off the plane.

“Lieutenant Baxter?”

As I turned to see who was calling me, I spotted a very pretty young yeoman. She was motioning for me to talk to her. “Sir, are you Lieutenant Baxter?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Sir, your luggage is being picked up now from Customs. I have a car waiting to take you to the Pentagon. If you’ll follow me, sir.”

She was as professional as she was pretty. “Wait, Yeoman,” I called. She turned to face me. “Don’t I have to clear Customs?”

She smiled in relief. “Oh, no sir, it’s all been taken care of. Now, if you’ll follow me.”

She led me to a nondescript black navy sedan. With the VIP treatment I had been receiving, I was actually surprised it wasn’t a Lincoln or a Cadillac, but instead, it was your standard Ford sedan. A skycap was loading my luggage in the trunk as I got in the back seat. There was a small package waiting for me.

“I thought you could use a fresh shirt, sir,” the yeoman explained.

I unwrapped the shirt, putting it on as we pulled away from the curb. “Can you tell me what’s going on?” I asked.

“I really wouldn’t know, sir,” she responded. “I’m just the delivery service.”

And an attractive delivery service she was, too. I had to remind myself that the Navy had some serious regulations against fraternizing with enlisted personnel. If not for that, I would have probably asked her out. She was an excellent driver as well. She wove her way through the early morning traffic with ease. We arrived at the Pentagon at 0715. I had fifteen minutes to spare.

Another yeoman—this one male—was assigned to take me to the offices of Code 146. I was grateful for the guide. The Pentagon is

actually the largest building on the planet. It consists of pentagonal rings of buildings, so rather than one large enclosed structure, it is actually a series of interconnected structures, so getting around is not easy. I have had friends who have been assigned there who learn their way to their office, the head, and the nearest cafeteria and after a year still get totally lost trying to find anything else.

“What exactly is Code 146?” I asked the yeoman as we continued at a brisk pace through the labyrinth of America’s military headquarters. I was sorry I hadn’t brought along some bread crumbs to drop so I could find my way back.

The yeoman looked back at me and grinned. “I don’t rightly know, sir. If you find out, maybe you can tell me.”

“But there really is a Code 146?” I asked.

“Oh, yes sir. It’s headed up by an Admiral Nepper. Nobody knows anything about Code 146—or about Admiral Nepper for that matter. I think he’s a Vice Admiral, though, so whatever Code 146 is, it must be important.”

It would have to be to pull the strings I had seen pulled in the last twenty-four hours. Special orders, aborted combat missions, waiting airplanes, and generally first class treatment smacked of something very big. I was almost over my pique at losing a chance for combat; it had been replaced by extreme curiosity about what was going on and what my role was going to be in it.

The Pentagon is a busy place. The halls are filled with people hustling from one place to another day and night, yet the yeoman had led me to an empty corridor. I hadn’t imagined that there was such a thing in the Pentagon, but I was apparently wrong. Then, he turned into an alcove. As I followed, I almost thought I smelled something briny, as if the ocean had invaded the air conditioning system of the building. Suddenly, I found myself in a small waiting room, furnished only with a Spartan Navy issue couch, guaranteed to be uncomfortable, and a reception desk.

Behind the desk was an absolutely stunning brunette. She wasn’t

military, so I immediately looked for traces of a wedding ring. Finding none, I gave her my most winning smile as the yeoman excused himself and headed back to his post. "I'm Lieutenant Richard Baxter, reporting as ordered," I said formally. Then, more friendly, "I'd appreciate it if you called me Rich."

She gave me a knowing smile, leaning toward me with a teasing view of an incredible pair of breasts that her low neckline did little to disguise. "I'm pleased to meet you, Lieutenant," she said, putting my libido on hold. "Admiral Nepper will be with you shortly. Please have a seat."

I took a seat on the couch which afforded me an excellent view of the receptionist. She had a face like an angel, framed by brown hair which actually sparkled. I thought it must be some popular new hair treatment. When you're on deployment and away from the United States, you tend to lose track of new trends. As I've already mentioned, the low-cut tight blouse did nothing to hide an absolutely beautiful set of breasts. The desk hid legs that I was sure must be stunning. I could only see down to her waist to observe that she was wearing a skirt which appeared to be molded to her body. It was made out of a shimmering gray-green material that I had never seen before.

"Look," I ventured, not ready to give up on this beauty, "I may be in town for a couple of days, and I don't really know anyone. Would you like to have dinner with me?"

For a lot of guys, the line never works. They say it with shyness bordering on embarrassment. Jet pilots usually have egos as powerful as their aircraft. There was nothing shy or embarrassed about my question. I had a pretty good hit rate with the line.

Not this time, though. She simply smiled at me and said calmly, "I don't think you're my type, Lieutenant."

"I might surprise you," I told her.

The smile grew even bigger. "And I might surprise you," she returned. Before I could answer, a deep voice boomed through the intercom,

“Ask Lieutenant Baxter to come in.”

I wondered how he knew I was waiting. His receptionist had never told him I was there.

“Go right through that door,” the receptionist pointed, making no move to show me in.

I tentatively opened the door. “Come in, Lieutenant.”

Most senior officers have nice offices, and Admiral Nepper was no exception. The motif was a combination of professional and personal mementos. Naval scenes dominated the pictures. They were mostly paintings of old sailing ships. On the desk and the conference table were bronze statues of horses—noble steeds with dashing poses. They looked ready to run from the tables at a moment’s notice.

“Did you have a pleasant flight, Lieutenant?” the Admiral asked, coming from behind his desk to shake my hand. He was a large man. I was six two, but he was taller than me by at least three inches. His dress blue jacket was almost straining from the size of his wide shoulders and expansive chest. His hair was gray and shone even more than the receptionist’s hair. If an actor were to portray him, it would have to be Charlton Heston in his prime.

I took his hand. His hand was larger and stronger than mine, but the handshake was firm without being uncomfortable. I met his icy blue stare man to man. He seemed to like that. He gave a nod to the conference table. “Have a seat, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I suppose you’re wondering why I sent for you,” he began, taking a seat at the head of the table when I was seated.

“Yes, sir. I am curious,” I agreed.

He sat at the head of the table and slid a sheet of paper in front of me. “Do you know what this is?”

I looked at the sheet. It was an engineering document with a red Top Secret stamp in the corner. “Yes, sir,” I replied. “This is a fuel pump for

an F-18." I had been Maintenance Officer for the squadron. I had seen dozens of those pumps. They ensured that the right amount of fuel reached the engine at all times.

"Very good, Lieutenant," the Admiral said with a slight smile. Then, he pushed another sheet in front of me. "And this?"

Similar to the first sheet, it was an engineering document. It was also labelled Top Secret. At first glance, it appeared identical to the first pump, but on closer inspection, there were subtle differences around the nozzle and the vanes. "It looks like the same pump, only there are some small modifications. Look here, sir, at this nozzle. It looks almost as if there are multiple nozzles there. The only way to control something like this would be with an extremely complicated computer chip. This won't work."

"No, Lieutenant," he said, pushing a third document under my nose. It appeared to be the same drawing, but the writing was all in Chinese. "This is the one that won't work. It lacks the right chip."

I looked up at him in astonishment and pointed at the second drawing. "Then are you telling me, sir, that this one works?"

"With the right chip, it most certainly works," he confirmed. "Of course, it doesn't work by itself. The F-18 has to be modified to make the finely tuned maneuvers this pump allows. When this new pump is installed in our F-18s, not only will the plane outmaneuver any other plane in the sky, but its range will be increased by ten to fifteen percent."

The increase in range was almost more important than the increase in maneuverability. With a longer range, targets previously too far inland for carrier strikes would be accessible. Range could be sacrificed for a bigger weapons load on coastal targets. With the changes in avionics built into the latest generation of F-18s, the new fuel pump meant an increase of at least five years in the life span of the fighter. There was just one problem—the Chinese document.

"So the Chinese know about this?"

“They know,” the Admiral said. “Their spy network is better than we had supposed. They could just as easily use this pump, or one similar to it, to extend the range of their own aircraft. All they need is the chip to make it work. And it is virtually impossible for them to develop the chip.”

“Unless they steal it, too,” I concluded.

The Admiral nodded. “I knew you’d understand. That was part of the reason I chose you for this mission. You have a quick grasp of technical matters, and you’ve flown the F-18. I can send you into the factory as an observer. It will be your job to determine where the leak is.”

“Sir,” I began, “I’m flattered, but I have no experience in espionage. Surely one of your Intel people would be better at this.”

“I can’t use my own people,” he said simply. “Code 146 is... highly secret. We have a small staff, and I have reason to believe that staff have been compromised. I need a fresh face at that plant—someone the enemy has never seen before. It has to be someone with the technical skills to understand what is at stake.”

There was something he wasn’t telling me, but I really couldn’t ask what it was. I had protested that I wasn’t qualified, but he had assured me that I was. If I protested further, I wouldn’t be helping my career. Still, I couldn’t help but wonder what was going on. There had to be dozens of Intelligence officers from other sections with a much better background than mine. There had to be reasons for my selection that I hadn’t been told, but Admiral Nepper had no plans to tell me what they were. I had reached the point at which all I could do was accept the mission and hear him out.

Satisfied that I would not offer further protest, he continued, “The chip is the product of Vulman Industries. It’s a manufacturing company with headquarters in Oklahoma. They do manufacturing in several locations, but the chip was developed by a small research team at the Oklahoma headquarters. Your cover story will be that you have been sent to look at the chip and how it works since you will be the first pilot

to field-test it.”

“Is that true, sir?” I asked suddenly. If it were so, that meant I would have the status of a test pilot. That would be a career-enhancing assignment which might even lead to something like astronaut training. I wouldn’t have my own squadron, but I would gladly shelve that idea to be an astronaut.

The Admiral dashed my hopes, though, when he said, “No, Lieutenant, it isn’t true. In fact, your cover will be that you are a civilian test pilot. You will leave all Navy identification with Mr. Vulman. But don’t worry. I can assure you that you will get a meaningful assignment out of this. Your future will be far better than it would be if I hadn’t selected you for this mission.”

I didn’t really understand the point he was trying to make, but again, I knew I would have to accept what he said.

“I’ve arranged a room for you at a nearby Marriott for this evening,” he went on. “There is a driver waiting for you in the passageway now to take you there. Then, in the morning, you will be picked up at the hotel at 0800 by Eric Vulman, the president of Vulman Industries. He will give you a full mission briefing. He’ll also fly you to his headquarters in Ovid.”

“Ovid, sir?”

“Yes,” the Admiral nodded. “Ovid, Oklahoma, is the headquarters of Vulman.”

“Exactly where is Ovid, sir?” I had envisioned a facility in Oklahoma City or Tulsa. At least, there would be a little nightlife. Instead, it sounded as if I was going to have to spend the next few days or weeks stuck in some little one-horse town on the Oklahoma prairie. Bummer.

“It’s a little hard to explain,” the Admiral said evasively. “Let’s just say it’s in eastern Oklahoma and leave it at that.”

What the hell is going on? I wondered. Of course, the Admiral was Intel. The intelligence community won’t even tell you what time it is if

you can't prove that you're cleared for it. Besides, I couldn't ask anything further. The Admiral had risen from his seat, requiring me to do the same. He offered me his hand as further evidence that my interview was over.

"Good luck, son," he said to me as I took his hand. "Just remember, this is a very important mission. Eric Vulman has my full confidence. Do whatever he says. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The beautiful receptionist was still at her desk. She smiled and I smiled back. "Last chance for a night on the town with me," I told her. She laughed, "You don't give up, do you?"

No, I really didn't. As a breed, Navy pilots are used to getting their way, and that includes with women. They don't call Navy wings 'little golden leg spreaders' for nothing. Secretaries are the best targets for pilots. They lead relatively boring lives, shuffling paper and taking orders from everybody. They think pilots live glamorous lives, filled with adventure and excitement, so they seem to be naturally attracted to us. All pilots are aware of that, too. "So what do you say?"

Still, pilots don't win them all. With a staged look of disappointment, she replied, "I really am sorry, Lieutenant. I have another commitment. I'm going fishing with some friends tonight."

I shrugged, "Well, then maybe next time." It was early in the day. I had plenty of time to find another girl. I wasn't about to waste the evening, though. Here I was, back from a month at sea. I had one night in the big city before being hustled off to the hinterlands, and I had no intention of wasting it.

The driver was waiting as promised. We had walked only a few paces when I stopped. "Wait a second. I left my cover." Cover was the Navy term for a cap. I had left my cap in the reception area and had forgotten to pick it up when I left. It was a common error since I had just come from being on a ship where caps are seldom worn below decks and never on the flight deck during operations.

As I walked back to the reception area, I could have sworn I heard a splashing sound. When I entered the reception area, the beautiful receptionist was nowhere to be seen, but my cover was still on the table next to the couch. I picked it up and prepared to leave when something odd caught my eye. There was something around the base of the reception desk. I looked at it closely. It was something wet. She probably spilled something and went to get something to clean it up, I thought.

Then I looked at the liquid more closely. It appeared to be water, but it was foaming slightly. I touched the liquid with the tips of my fingers and held them to my nose. There was an odd smell, but one I recognized. It was the smell of kelp. The water was ocean water. What was she doing with ocean water at her desk? Shaking my head, I left. There was certainly something strange about Code 146. I just wished that I knew what it was.

The room at the Marriott was comfortable, and the staff were accommodating. Even though it was still early, they got my room ready, and I was in it by eleven in the morning. In the room, there was a suitcase, open on the bed. It was a nice one, favored by many business travellers, but it wasn't mine. Attached to it was a note:

Lieutenant Baxter:

I've taken the liberty of moving your personal effects to this bag, along with clothes and other items which will confirm your cover identity. There is also a small travel kit in the bag which you should use to place all of your Navy IDs and other items which do not conform to your new identity. You can give them to me in the morning. Just leave all of your uniforms in the room when you leave, and they will be taken care of for you. I look forward to working with you.

Eric Vulman

I looked through the bag. He had done an excellent job. Any item I had owned which had a Navy crest or identification from the Eisenhower had been removed and replaced with an appropriate civilian equivalent. There was also a wallet which identified me as

Mike Donovan, a civilian test pilot for McDonald Douglas. I was based out of St Louis. I didn't know the city well, but I had been there, so I could fake it if I had to. I made a mental note to see how the Blues were doing so I could discuss hockey if the subject came up.

I took a shower—my first one since the day before on the Eisenhower. Then, I sacked out for a few hours so I would be alert for the evening. While I was asleep, I had the weirdest dream. I could have sworn I heard Admiral Nepper's voice. "Are you sure this will work?" he was asking. "I do have other operatives we could use."

"And they'll be compromised, too," another voice said. It was a sultry, feminine voice.

"But what if he makes a mistake? He will be under a lot of pressure."

"He can handle it, uncle," the woman's voice said. "Your brother has handled many similar situations."

"I don't know. My brother may be over his head on this affair."

"Perhaps I should get to know our lieutenant better," the woman's voice mused.

I drifted further into sleep and couldn't remember anything else of the dream.

I awoke about three in the afternoon feeling refreshed. This was my one night in the big city, and I had now had enough sleep to be able to enjoy my evening. All I needed was someone of the female persuasion to share it with. There had to be some good singles bars in the area. With the Pentagon practically around the corner, there had to be a lot of singles. Therefore: singles bars.

I checked in at the concierge desk. It was manned—or rather personed if there was such a word in the politically correct climate of our capital city—by an attractive young brunette. "Tell me," I asked with my most charming smile, "where is the best place for a guy like me to meet girls?" I said it half in hopes she would offer herself. The direct approach is usually best, I thought.

"I know of several," a soft, feminine voice said behind me. I turned and

found my one true love—at least for the evening. She was about five six with bright red hair practically down to her ass. She wore a short Kelly green mini dress that displayed her considerable assets extremely well. Her face was incredibly beautiful, and her impish grin was enough to tell me that I wouldn't be hitting the nightspots alone. She held out a delicate hand with dark red nails. "Diane Moone, she said, "with an 'e'."

"Diane with an 'e' or Moone with an 'e'?" I asked, taking the hand.

"Both," she replied with a smile.

It had to be love, I thought.

The evening was nothing short of fantastic. Diane was the most incredible woman I had ever known. She had it all—looks, poise, intelligence, and a sex drive that would make a monk blush. We started with dinner at a little place in Georgetown she knew.

"It's a great place," I told her, sipping my wine with dinner. "You must spend a lot of time in Washington. Do you live here?"

"Oh, no," she laughed. "I'm just here visiting my uncle. He's in the Navy."

That gave us plenty to talk about. We discussed the Navy and in particular, Navy flying. She was remarkably well versed on all types of aircraft and their capabilities. The dinner passed quickly. Then, we had planned to cab back to a nightspot not far from the hotel, but at the last minute, that plan changed.

"Look," she said with a smile, "let's cut to the chase. You don't need to take me drinking and dancing to get laid. Let's just go back to your room, order something with bubbles, and not waste time listening to loud music."

It was an offer no red-blooded American boy could turn down. Now, I knew I was in love.

I was too much of a gentleman to discuss my conquests in detail, but with Diane, I wanted to break that rule. I wanted everyone to know that I had sex with one of the most incredible women I had ever known.

Men enjoy sex most when the women they're doing it with are enjoying themselves, too. I don't know when I enjoyed sex more. Diane was a veritable tigress, leaping and pouncing in my bed until I was completely spent. We fell asleep in each other's arms.

The wake-up call came through at seven. After I hung up the phone, I realized Diane was gone. I hadn't heard her leave, but I found myself regretting that she had. She was an absolutely incredible lover and I missed her already. She was a real looker, and that voice... Come to think of it, I realized, her voice was the woman's voice in my dream. I shuddered involuntarily. Just what in hell was going on anyway? Come to think of it, all I knew about her was her name. I hadn't thought to ask where she was from or her phone number. I knew she had an uncle in the Navy, but I hadn't even asked about him. It was as if I was so wrapped up in her spell that I hadn't thought to ask her anything.

Eric Vulman had provided me with a good variety of casual clothing. I selected a dark blue polo shirt, tan slacks and brown loafers. I looked more as if I was going out to play eighteen holes rather than starting on an espionage assignment. It was probably just as well. I never cared much for trench coats and slouch hats.

Eric Vulman was waiting for me in the lobby. He called my name when he saw me. I assumed he must have seen a picture of me, for he seemed to have no trouble picking me out of the busy morning crowd in the lobby.

"Eric Vulman," he said in a friendly voice tinged with an Oklahoma twang as he stuck out a large, beefy hand. I had fairly large hands, but his were larger than mine. We were about the same height, but he carried about thirty pounds more than me. None of it appeared to be fat. Except for a slight limp, he seemed to be in perfect shape. He was dressed much as I was, although his polo shirt was green. To a casual observer, he might have been my father. We looked like men cut from the same cloth. I took an instant liking to him.

"Rich Baxter," I replied.

He shook his head with a smile. "Not anymore. Remember?"

I could have kicked myself. I had a new identity and had forgotten to use it. That could be very bad during the mission, I realized. "Sorry, Mike Donovan."

The smile became wider. "Pleased to meet you, Mike. Have you eaten yet?"

"No, sir."

"Drop the 'sir'," he said with a laugh. "You're a civilian now. Just call me Eric. Everybody else does."

After we had ordered breakfast and each had a cup of coffee in front of us, Eric asked, "Have you ever been to Oklahoma?"

"No, s... uh, I mean no," I replied. "I've flown over it a few times, and I saw Twister twice if that helps."

He laughed, "Well, that's a start anyhow. Most people think it's just a buffer to keep the Texans from moving north. They picture it as a flat, dry prairie with tornadoes every day."

"It isn't like that?" I blurted. To be honest, I thought that was an accurate picture of the state.

He shook his head. "Not really. Oh, there are parts of the state that are like that. Eastern Oklahoma is green with rolling hills, lots of lakes and lots of trees. That's where Ovid is. I think you'll like it."

"What about the tornado part?"

"Ovid's never been hit by one," he told me.

"There's always a first time," I pointed out as our breakfasts arrived.

He just chuckled, as if there was a joke that only he understood.

"So," I pressed between bites, "I understand you're to brief me on the mission."

"That's right," he agreed. "You already have your new identity. Are your old IDs in your travel kit?"

“Yes,” I replied. “I’ll keep them hidden.”

He shook his head. “That won’t work. I’ll take them when we’re in the air. We can’t take the risk of someone going through your luggage, can we?”

“I suppose not,” I agreed. Deep down, though, I didn’t want to let go of those IDs. They described who I was. I didn’t care so much about the credit cards, but my military ID and my wings were in there. I didn’t want anything to happen to them.

“Good,” he said, motioning the waitress that we needed more coffee. When she had filled our cups, he leaned forward and continued, “There are a few things you need to be aware of in Ovid. In many ways, it is your typical small Midwestern town. In other ways, though, it’s very different. If you are to have any chance at success in your mission, it’s important that you stay in character at all times and I do mean all times. If anyone discovers that you are not Mike Donovan, your life could be in danger. Do you understand?”

“You make it sound like East Berlin during the Cold War,” I commented.

“Do you understand?” he repeated grimly.

“Yes, Eric, I understand,” I said seriously. There was something he wasn’t telling me. What did he know about what I would be facing in Ovid? I thought. What made Ovid different from other small towns? I really couldn’t imagine.

We drove to the airport. It was one of those little suburban fields that caters to corporate jets. There, parked in front of an executive hangar, was a beautiful plane. It was thin and sleek, with sweptback wings which angled straight up on the tips. It was white with blue letters reading Vulman Industries. I hadn’t expected anything like it.

“What do you think?” he asked with a smile.

“It’s a Learjet 45, isn’t it?” I asked.

“You know your aircraft,” he replied.

“But they’re brand new,” I said. “That’s a—what? —seven million dollar plane?”

“Configured the way you see it, closer to eight,” he answered. “It cruises at over 400 knots with a ceiling of 51,000 feet. Not bad for a civilian plane, is it?”

Compared to the F-18, it flew slow and low, but he was right. It was an impressive plane. My hands itched to take the stick and try it out. Eric must have been reading my mind, for he asked, “Would you like to fly us to Ovid?”

“Very much,” I replied. “You don’t mind? I’ve never been checked out on one of these.”

“Don’t worry. It’s just you and me and there are dual controls. I can take over if you try to make it fly like an F-18.”

We loaded my gear on board. I felt like a part of me was being stolen away when he took the kit and removed all of my real IDs. I felt better, though, when I sat in the pilot’s seat. The Learjet 45 wasn’t as complex as an F-18. Of course, it had no need of weapons systems and advanced radars. Still, it was an impressive machine. Controls were arranged in a logical and easy-to-use fashion. Every instrument was civilian state of the art.

“Need any help?” Eric asked.

“I don’t think so,” I replied, as I started going through the pre-flight checklist. In a few minutes, I had finished the list and was ready to taxi out. Eric was an able assistant, switching radio frequencies for me and acting as a second set of eyes. Until we were off the ground and at cruising altitude, we would be in what pilots derisively called ‘Indian Country.’ This was because of all the Cherokees and Apaches and other small planes that populated the lower altitudes. There were so many of them that a second set of eyes was needed just to make sure everybody stayed out of each other’s way.

Once cleared, the Learjet accelerated effortlessly down the long concrete runway. We made it off the deck without a bump and

smoothly climbed to 8,000 feet as requested by ATC. I knew how planes were required to act in civilian airspace, but I longed for a military field and an area closed off to civilian traffic. There, I could have punched the Learjet and scooted to cruising altitude in no time. Finally, we were cleared to 38,000 feet, so I put the jet into a gentle climb and we were off for Oklahoma.

“What’s the night life like in Ovid?” I asked Eric as I flipped on the autopilot. I wasn’t expecting much, but I had hoped for at least a little action.

“There’s not much to it,” he admitted. “There are a couple of movies in town. Hell, we even still have a drive-in movie, too. There’s the bowling alley and a couple of bars. I hear Randy Andy’s is the spot most of my single folks hang out in.”

Now that place sounded very promising. “Is it a strip joint?” I asked hopefully.

“Well, I haven’t been there,” he admitted. “I’ve been happily married for a long time. I don’t think stripping is allowed there, though. Ovid is fairly liberal for a Bible Belt community, but there are some limits. If it wasn’t for the college, we would probably be a lot more blue nosed.”

“It sounds like a good place to raise a family, though,” I allowed.

“Oh, it is,” Eric agreed. “It is a clean town. There’s really no crime at all. There’s no drug problem. We like it in Ovid.”

“Is that why you have your headquarters there?”

“That’s one of the reasons,” he replied, not bothering to mention what the other reasons were.

We talked about a lot of things on the way to Ovid. Eric was a true man of the world. Whatever the subject, he had had some experience with it. I thought being in the Navy had taken me to many exotic places, but Eric had not only been to all of them, but many more as well. It seemed as if he had been everywhere and done everything. I remember thinking at the time that it seemed as if he would have needed several lifetimes to accomplish so much. Sometimes, the most

bizarre possibility is the correct one, as I was soon to learn.

I found myself really liking Eric. He was becoming something of a surrogate father to me in the short time I had known him. My own father and I had gotten along okay, but Dad's feet were firmly planted on the ground. Being an engineer in a high-tech lab for the rest of his life suited him very well. Me? I knew I had to fly, and Eric was the same way. He could talk engineering at levels I could barely understand. He was obviously the genius who had designed the chip for the fuel pump. His grasp of science and engineering was the best I had ever seen. But my father was a good engineer as well. What drew me closer to Eric was his love of flying.

"Eric, excuse me for saying this, but I'm surprised Vulman Industries is big enough to justify a plane like this."

He grinned at me. "Working already? It sounds as if you're ready to put me on the list of suspects."

"No," I rushed to say. "I didn't mean it that way at all. I was just curious about your company."

"Well," he began, "we've been in the auto parts business for a number of years. That's how we can afford a plane like this. We've always had a good relationship with Ford. A number of years ago, someone in my family even helped design the Mercury for them. We've got plants in four states as well as Canada and Mexico. That's how we got started in aviation."

"Excuse me?"

"Think about it, son," he explained. "Rolls Royce, BMW, Saab, Mitsubishi, Nissan, and of course, Ford, have all been involved in aviation as well as automobiles. It's only natural that their suppliers would follow them in whatever lines they take on."

"So is the entire plant in Ovid dedicated to the new fuel pump?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, not yet. Eventually we will start assembling it in Ovid, but we'll need time to do that. I've just put new loans in place

to finance the project. But we have to find out where the leak is first. Otherwise, the proprietary nature of the product might become public knowledge, and we'll have nothing to sell."

That certainly eliminated any suspicions I might have unconsciously had about Eric. I had decided that he would be the one person in Ovid I would be able to trust.

"Time to start our descent," he told me.

"Then I should contact the tower in Ovid," I concluded.

"No tower there, son. It's just a 4,000 foot concrete strip and a couple of executive hangars. There's not much air traffic in and out of Ovid. I'll talk you in."

Ovid's airfield turned out to be at the south end of a long, narrow valley. The surrounding hills were wooded and were already starting to green up in the early spring. Farms spread across the valley, fields already green with winter wheat and other early crops. As we made our approach from the south, I could see in the distance a collection of buildings and a pattern of streets.

"That's Ovid," Eric explained.

"How big is it?"

"About fifteen thousand," he told me, "and growing all the time."

He should be a spokesman for their Chamber of Commerce, I thought. I began to wonder how I was going to find enough to do in a town of fifteen thousand. I wondered if they set up grandstands on the main drag so everyone could go watch the sidewalks roll up at sundown.

It did look pleasant in a pastoral sort of way. It actually reminded me of some of the little valleys I had flown over in the Mediterranean area. Except for the distinctly American street grid laid out in continuous squares, it could have been a little town in Italy or Greece. I could see how it could grow on a person, but not on me. I was strictly a city boy.

The Learjet made a smooth, fluid approach to the field. Landing on a 4,000 foot long airstrip was a walk in the park after landing fighters on

carrier decks. It was an easy plane to fly, and I was sorry to see our flight end. I had no idea how long it would be before I was in the air again, but even a day would be too long.

We parked the plane in front of a hangar which had 'Vulman Industries' painted on the side. Eric pressed a button on a device that looked like a garage door opener and the hangar door flew up. Inside was a white Mustang convertible, brand new and polished until it shone.

"That's your transportation," he told me, nodding at the car.

"Not bad," I commented.

"No," he agreed, "not bad at all. There's no Hertz or Avis in Ovid, but as I told you, we get along pretty good with Ford. That one is courtesy of the Ford dealer here in town. When we stow your gear, you can drive on into town and get settled. There's a reservation in your name at the Ovid Inn."

"How do I find the Ovid Inn?"

He pointed at a modest highway that ran parallel to the runway. "Just follow that road north. Ovid's about three miles ahead. The Ovid Inn will be on your right about three stoplights into town. If you have any trouble, just stop and ask someone. I'll give you this evening to get settled in. Then, we'll get started first thing in the morning."

"I'm fine now if you want to get started today," I told him.

"I appreciate that," he replied, "but we're not ready for you yet. Let's just settle on starting in my office tomorrow morning at eight."

"Okay," I agreed, throwing my bags into the back seat of the Mustang.

"Do you need a ride into town? This seems to be the only car."

"Oh, I have my own transportation." I assumed he meant that a car was being sent for him. It was his business, I decided.

"One more thing before you go, son," Eric said as I got ready to fire up the Mustang. "Remember what I told you. Ovid is... different. You've got to maintain your cover at all times. Don't be surprised at anything

you see or hear. Just play it cool and we'll talk in the morning."

"Sure," I agreed, not having the foggiest idea what he was talking about. I was soon to learn.

The drive into Ovid was pleasant enough. It was early afternoon, the warmest part of the day, and a clear blue Oklahoma sky unfettered by the pollution of larger cities let a sufficient amount of solar heating in to make the ride comfortable with the top down. I had never driven a Mustang before, and I was pleased to see it was a tight, responsive car. I vowed to consider one the next time I got ready to buy a car.

I accelerated smoothly along the nearly deserted highway, but I kept my speed within the legal limit. I had heard too many stories about small town speed traps. No local cop was going to make his quota from me.

Ovid was a clean, attractive little town. Even the businesses on the edge of town displayed signs of prosperity. Farm implement dealers, car dealers, and gas stations all appeared clean and prosperous, if not busy. Oh well, I thought, it was a workday. Saturdays were probably the big business days for Ovid. That was the time when all the farmers came in to buy whatever they needed.

Then, my pleasant, relaxed drive into Ovid fell apart. Without warning, the Mustang engine, which had been so responsive only moments before, suddenly revved for no apparent reason, causing the car to shoot ahead at fifty, a good fifteen miles over the speed limit. As if it had a mind of its own, it shot through the approaching intersection against the light, swerving to narrowly miss a pickup truck which had started when the light changed. Then, as quickly as it started, the excitement ended. With no help from me, the engine died down to an idle and the car pulled neatly up at the curb.

What had happened? I wondered. Had the gas pedal stuck? Even if it had, why did the car swerve to avoid the truck. I hadn't been able to grab it to miss the truck. It was as if the car had a mind of its own.

I didn't have much time to think about it, though. As I looked in my rear-view mirror, I saw the sight I had hoped to avoid. Red and blue

lights silently flashing, a police cruiser had pulled up directly behind me. I watched in resignation as a tall, slender police officer, his eyes hidden behind mirrored sunglasses, stepped out of his car and walked purposely up to mine.

“Step out of the car, please, sir,” he said with the mantra of all traffic cops. I did as he asked. “Was there a problem back there, sir?”

“Yes,” I said, relieved that he at least seemed to be willing to listen to what had happened. “Something went wrong with my car back there. It went out of control for a moment.”

“All by itself?” he asked sardonically.

“Yes,” I replied indignantly. “If you were already behind me, you must know I was driving safely just before I went through that light.”

“So you admit to going through a red light?”

“Of course,” I replied, trying to keep my temper down. “Didn’t you hear what I just said? The car went out of control. It must have been a stuck gas pedal or something.”

“Or something. I need to see your license and registration.”

I was doing my best to control my temper. I didn’t want to make any waves my first hour in Ovid, but the cop was pissing me off. I fumbled for my wallet and pulled out the Missouri driver’s license that identified me as Mike Donovan.

“And the registration?” he asked.

Eric hadn’t said anything about the registration. I assumed it was probably in the glove compartment. I slid back into the seat and opened it. There was nothing there—not even an owner’s manual. The same was true of the compartment between the bucket seats.

“Look,” I said, sliding back out of the seat, “Eric Vulman loaned me this car. I’m working with him on a project out at Vulman Industries.” I hoped that he was an important enough person that the name would carry some weight. The officer’s expression didn’t change, though.

“I’m sure if you give him a call, he can verify that. He said he got the

car from the local Ford dealer. If you check with one of them, I'm sure they know where the registration is."

"I'll do that," he said, "but for now, I'll have to impound the car. You'll have to see the Judge this afternoon."

"Now, wait a minute!" I began to protest.

He looked at me through the mirrored glasses and asked quietly, "Do you want to add resisting arrest to the charges?"

Muttering to myself, I got into the Mustang on the passenger side as he slid under the wheel. I found myself wishing someone would steal his police car while he was doing this. To my shock, though, the police cruiser started up, too. I looked back and was surprised to see another officer behind the wheel of the cruiser. He looked like the twin of the officer who was with me.

"I thought you were alone," I said.

"Did you?" was his only reply.

At least, I had the chance to look around Ovid. It was a newer version of a lot of the small towns I remembered back in New England. I grew up in a suburb just outside the Beltway, so I had seen little towns like Ovid before. I wondered how a person managed to live in a burg like Ovid and not die from boredom. Still, I had to admit, it was a pleasant town—the sort of town Beaver Cleaver must have grown up in.

Since we were on the highway business strip, I didn't see many pedestrians, but the ones I did see were well dressed and, for the most part, attractive. The only thing that was odd about them was that some of them looked a little... well, transparent for lack of a better word. I don't mean I could see right through them. It was like looking at a 3-D image. You know it doesn't really leap off the page, but it looks as if it does. That was the way it was with some of the people. You couldn't actually see right through them, but it looked as if you could, if that makes any sense.

Just before we turned off the business strip, I saw a big sign out in front of a bar which called itself Randy Andy's. Maybe after I got

finished with this small town kangaroo court, I'd check in at the Ovid Inn and go down to Randy Andy's. It was probably all the action Ovid had to offer.

We proceeded down a main arterial populated by small mom and pop shops and older houses. It gave way to the main business district of Ovid. It looked like your typical small town with lots of concrete, diagonal parking, and no buildings over three stories tall. We were actually about a block off the main business street, but I could see enough to get the general idea. We came up to a block which seemed to consist entirely of civic buildings. We came to a final stop as the Mustang pulled in front of a gray granite building with Doric columns in front. The words 'City Hall' were carved into the granite above the columns. As small town city halls went, it was reasonably impressive. A blue flag, probably the state flag, was flying next to the US flag in the grassy area in front of the building. It could have been the city hall of almost any small town in the country.

Oh well, I thought to myself, at least justice was swift in Ovid. I would meekly take my ticket and be done with it. After all, I was a jet pilot. We all had the reputation of being fast drivers, and most of us were. This wouldn't be my first time in front of a judge. I guessed I could look forward to another sharp increase in my auto insurance.

Just as we were about to open the door to the courtroom, it burst open, and three little balls of energy disguised as little giggling girls came running out.

"There you are!" a woman called to them from down the passageway.

"What were you girls doing?"

"We went to see the Judge!" the oldest of them, maybe ten, said, twirling her skirt.

Another girl, about eight said, "Yeah!" with breathless excitement.

It was the third girl that I was watching, though. She, too, appeared to be about eight, with long blonde hair and a gingham dress. She seemed a little dazed. "This isn't right," she muttered.

Before she could say anything else, the woman—presumably her mother—grabbed her by the arm. Addressing all the girls, she said sternly, “I can’t take my eyes off you for a minute! I come in here to renew my driver’s license and you wander off to bother the Judge. Now come along, all of you.”

They left together, the little blonde girl looking back at us in confusion and... fear? Yes, fear.

I looked at the officer, but he just smiled at me from behind his glasses and said, “Kids,” as if that explained it all. It didn’t.

The courtroom was nicer than I would have expected in a small town. It was nearly deserted as well. The only spectator was an attractive blonde woman about my age who sat primly in the back row of the visitor’s gallery. I glanced at her quickly enough to see that she was wearing a wedding ring. I guessed she wouldn’t be joining me for a drink at Randy Andy’s that evening.

The Judge was already seated. From the look on his face, he had had a long day. That didn’t bode well for me. He was about fifty, I would have guessed, and very distinguished-looking in his black robe. His hair was mostly brown with just a hint of gray. He was wearing gold-rimmed glasses which appeared to be fairly expensive. Being a judge must pay fairly well, I thought, even in a little town like Ovid.

“What have we here, Officer Mercer?” he asked in an authoritative voice.

“Reckless driving and endangerment,” he said formally. “Also no registration in his vehicle.”

“Well, we ought to be able to take care of that pretty quickly. What’s your name, son?”

“Mike Donovan,” I told him as I stood before the bench. I had used the name so often that it was starting to sound natural to me.

“Well, Mr. Donovan, exactly why were you engaging in reckless driving?” there was a touch of amusement in his voice.

“Something went wrong with my car,” I told him. “Eric Vulman loaned it

to me while I was in Ovid. Apparently the gas pedal stuck and I went through a red light.”

“I see,” said the Judge. “And do you have any proof of this?”

“Perhaps someone should inspect the car,” I suggested.

“That’s been done, Your Honor,” Officer Mercer said. “There is nothing wrong with the car.”

“What are you talking about?” I exploded. “No one had checked that car! He’s lying, Your Honor!”

The Judge pounded his gavel and boomed, “That will be enough, Mr. Donovan!” Then, he said something else to me, but I couldn’t understand it. It sounded as if it were Latin or something. Before I could ask him to repeat himself, I felt a sudden odd tingling sensation and dizziness. My knees turned to water and I fell to the floor.

“Mr. Donovan, you appear to be in some distress,” the Judge observed. “Under the circumstances, I think you should be allowed to rest. This case is continued until further notice.”

I didn’t have a clue what was wrong. I just realized I couldn’t stand up without becoming dizzy, and the tingling was becoming more intense.

“Officer Mercer,” the Judge ordered, “take Mr. Donovan to someplace where he can rest until he has recovered.”

I felt a strong hand lift me to my feet. With the officer’s help, I was able to stand and even walk. I assumed he would be taking me to an office where I could sit down, but instead, he led me out of the building and back to his car. They had apparently taken the Mustang someplace else, for I saw that where it had been parked, there was now a white Lincoln.

“Where are we going?” I managed to mumble as he positioned me in the back seat and allowed me to lie down.

“Someplace where you’ll be safe,” he told me.

I must have slept in the back seat, for the next thing I remembered was Officer Mercer pulling me out of the seat and onto my feet again.

We were parked in front of a small apartment complex. He helped me walk to the second floor of one of the buildings and managed to support me against the wall while opening the door of one of the apartments. As I was slumped against the building, I noticed the officer seemed much taller than he had before. We were about the same height, but now, he seemed to tower over me. I never thought to ask him why he had taken me so far just to rest. My mind felt like it had just been processed through a blender, and there didn't seem to be one muscle working correctly in my body.

He led me to a bedroom and gently dropped me on the bed. "Thanks," I said barely above a whisper. Even my voice sounded strange. I stopped thinking about it, though, for I quickly drifted off to sleep.

My sleep was anything but restful. The tingling continued, and my muscles seemed to spasm. It felt almost as if my body was twisting and contorting itself into a new shape. I felt parts of my body start to grow while others shrank. Then, as quickly as the sensations began, they stopped. The tingling ebbed away, and I seemed to know instinctively that I had control of my body again.

I lay there with my eyes still closed as I let my mind clear. Almost like going through a pre-flight checklist, I began to take inventory of myself. Something was tickling my ears, and there seemed to be extra weight around my earlobes. That was nothing compared to the extra weight I felt on my chest. My chest felt warm, but my legs felt cooler, as if someone had removed my pants.

Even with my eyes closed, it began to dawn on me what had happened and who—or at least what—I had become, but it seemed too bizarre to accept. Even though my mind had cleared, I denied to myself what had happened. I wanted desperately to keep my eyes closed. I wanted to refute in darkness what my other senses were telling me had occurred. At last, I knew I could wait no longer. I opened my eyes.

I was lying on my back, so I looked down at my chest, fearing the worst. My fears were confirmed. My chest was covered in a knit material, plum in color, and rising from it were two large, round

breasts. My first thought upon seeing them was that if they were this large when I was lying on my back, they would be gigantic when I stood up.

Slowly, I pushed myself into a sitting position, grimacing as I felt those large breasts pulling down on my chest. A mane of coal-black hair fell over my shoulders. The strands were long and almost shiny with only a slight curl. I raised my hands to push the hair away and saw that they were now much smaller with long, slim fingers and feminine nails painted a dark red. Even my skin had a reddish cast to it. It was nearly the color of bronze, I realized, and smooth and flawless.

I looked down at myself again. I saw large breasts, a slim waist, flaring hips, and slim legs encased in nylon. There was no mistaking what I was. I was now a woman. But that was impossible, I tried to tell myself.

I had no idea where I was, but it was obviously a woman's room. The carpet was a rose pink. There were floral drapes and off-white walls. A vanity sat against one wall, and there were cosmetics neatly arranged on its surface. I could see into the bathroom where nylons were hanging over the shower door and a bra was draped carelessly over the back of the toilet. Was this the room of the woman I had become? It seemed likely.

I staggered to a full-length mirror on the back of the bedroom door, nearly losing my balance from the changed weight distribution of my body. Staring back at me was a young woman. She looked very exotic with her bronze skin and long black hair. Her face was classically beautiful with high cheekbones which gave her eyes an almost Oriental cast. The eyes themselves were such a dark brown that they appeared nearly black. As I had realized from looking down, she—I—had a very well-proportioned body and legs that were sensational, even without a heel to set off the ankles. In short, I was a knockout. If I had been my old self and seen this girl, I would have given almost anything for a night in bed with her.

I could have been Hispanic, but I realized I was probably at least part Indian. After all, Oklahoma had always had a large Indian population.

At one time, the entire state had been an Indian reservation. It didn't bother me to be an Indian. As a naval officer, I had lived, worked, and played with members of every ethnic group imaginable. The US military is probably the most well-integrated organization in American society.

No, being an Indian was the least of my worries. Instead, I was bothered at being a woman. I had read a story once where a man got changed into a woman and didn't realize it at first. Believe me, I realized it. Everything felt wrong. First, having worn closely cropped hair all my life, I had no idea how heavy the stuff was. And what was pulling on my ears? I pulled back the hair from my right ear and saw a long, dangling tassel composed of turquoise and silver threaded through my earlobe.

My entire torso felt different as well. I had taken the shape of my body for granted, for it had basically remained unchanged from the time I had graduated from Annapolis. But now, it felt entirely different. It protruded in some places and indented in others that it shouldn't have, causing me to walk with a swaying motion. But the worst of all the sensations was what was—or rather wasn't—between my legs. There was something silky covering my crotch, almost like a soft, tight bandage covering a gaping wound. I felt a sudden sensation of loss, as if I were incomplete.

I thought I would pass out from the shock. I felt as if I had entered a high-G turn causing my body to feel strange and my vision to tunnel out. I staggered numbly back to the bed, sitting on it as my knees gave out. Even that sensation was odd as my greatly expanded ass flowed across the mattress.

Then, I did something that only a few hours earlier, I could never have imagined doing: I cried. It was just a few tears at first, like a small leak at the corners of my eyes, but the effortless tears became a trembling stream followed by a sobbing torrent. Strangely, it felt good to cry, as if my problems lessened, washed away by the tears. As a male, I hadn't cried since I was ten, so I felt as if eighteen years of tears were draining out of my body.

I looked across the room at my reflection. Rivulets of black flowed down my cheeks, and I realized for the first time that I was wearing makeup. I licked my lips, tasting the slightly sweet taste of lipstick.

From beyond the bedroom, a door suddenly opened and closed. "Holly, are you okay?" a woman's voice called.

I stood up again. I had a sneaky hunch she was talking to me. "In... in here," I called, hearing for the first time my new soprano voice.

A terrific looking redhead in a green sweater dress looked into the room, staring directly at me. She had sparkling green eyes and a figure almost as fantastic as mine. She appeared to be about my age—my new age—but she was a couple of inches taller than me, whatever height I had become.

"Holy shit," she said, dumbfounded. "You're real!"

It wasn't something I would have expected her to say. "I'm real?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

"Oh!" she gasped. "I'm sorry. I just meant... Look, tell me straight up: do you remember who you were?"

"Who I was? I don't even know who I am now," I crossly told her. I tried to fold my arms for emphasis, but I found it hard to do with the breasts sticking out so far.

She looked at what I was trying to do and giggled, "Well, if you're trying to fold your arms over those melons, you must have been a guy before."

"You make it sound like this has happened before."

She sighed, "More times than you can imagine, honey. The Judge seems to get his laughs out of changing men into women. He even changes a few women into men just for a little balance. He's quite a guy, our Judge."

Confused, I sat back down on the bed. "This is all happening too fast for me."

She sat down next to me and put a sisterly arm around my shoulders.

If she had done that to me a few hours ago while I was sitting on a bed, I would have had her naked in a New York minute and ready to rock and roll. Now, though, I had the same plumbing she did. Lesbian sex didn't seem like much fun, either.

"Okay," she began, "I'll start from the beginning. Your name is Holly Ann Sheridan, and you're the Executive Assistant to Eric Vulman at Vulman Industries. You're twenty-one years old and your mother was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian. Your parents died two years ago in a car crash, but don't worry about that part. They never really existed. Shall I go on?"

"Yes," I replied. "Start by telling me who you are."

She smiled. "I'm Andrea Pyron, your roommate. I work at Vulman, too, as a secretary in the Production Department. We've roomed together for a year."

"Are you..." I began. "I mean, were you a man, too?"

She laughed, "Do I act like it?"

My face reddened, if it could become any redder. "No, I guess not. It's just that you said it happens a lot."

"It does, but not every time," she told me. "I was a lobbyist from Oklahoma City. My Oklahoma accent is for real and I'm one hundred percent girl—always have been and always will be."

"Oh my god!" I cried. "I've got an accent, too." I hadn't realized it until she had mentioned her own twang. I sounded just like her.

"You'll get used to it, honey," she told me. "Everybody does."

"Maybe," I allowed, "but I don't think I'll get used to this body."

"That's where you're wrong. Just about everybody gets used to their new identity after a while. I think it's part of the magic. If I were to go back to my old life, I probably wouldn't even know how to be a lobbyist anymore."

Did that mean that in time, I'd forget how to fly a plane? Did the magic of Ovid mean that I'd be condemned to a life of skirts and high heels,

shuffling paper from one office to another instead of soaring above the clouds? It was a prospect I couldn't bring myself to consider. No matter what my anatomy told me, I was Richard Baxter, Lieutenant, United States Navy—a pilot and a man.

"I know what you're thinking," she said.

"You do?" I responded. How could she? How could someone who had always been a woman understand what it meant to lose your manhood? I wondered if she would have felt the same way if she had suddenly awakened with a two-day growth of beard and a penis and testicles crowding between her legs.

"Yes," she went on. "You want to fight it. That's okay—go ahead and fight it. You'll come to some sort of balance eventually. You'll have to, or you'll go crazy."

"You mean I won't be allowed to cut my hair, wear pants at work, and pick up chicks for some great girl-to-girl sex?" I said sarcastically.

She actually took the question seriously. "Well, I suppose you could cut your hair. As for wearing pants, Mr. Vulman probably wouldn't be very pleased unless they were very businesslike. I don't even think you have anything like that in your wardrobe. As far as lesbian sex, though, that's not very likely. Ovid is a small town, so there aren't any good gay bars. I suppose you could find it if you looked hard enough, but it doesn't fit into your character."

"My character?"

She nodded. "That's right. You see, Holly Sheridan has existed for some time now. There are placeholders here—we call them shades. They are like people, but not quite really there, if that makes any sense."

"It does," I replied. "I've seen some of them. I just didn't know what they were. So there is a shade of everybody before something in Ovid changes them?"

"Usually," she clarified, "but not always. Sometimes, the Judge makes an entirely new person out of whole cloth. Then, reality warps to

accept that person as if they had always been part of Ovid. It's a little complicated, but since most people don't remember their transformations, it works out. Only about one in four or five people who are changed remember who they were before."

So the Judge was the force behind the transformations. I wasn't really surprised. The words I thought were Latin must have been some sort of spell. The questions were how and why, and what did it have to do, if anything, with the reason I had been sent to Ovid in the first place? I had to have a strategy. What would it be?

I had to know more about what was going on in Ovid. Eric Vulman had brought me here, so that meant that odds were good he knew what was going on in Ovid. He was probably even a part of it. Andrea had said that I was his executive assistant. It sounded like a glorified title for secretary. The best strategy then seemed to be to keep my cover as a transformed civilian pilot and try to fit in until I could talk to him. After all, I was still a Naval officer as far as I was concerned, and I had a mission to perform. I just wasn't sure how I was going to go about it. Until I talked to Eric, I had no choice but to play the part I had been given.

"Okay," I sighed, "I guess you'd better tell me what my character is."

She shrugged. "There's not a great deal to tell. You have always just been a normal young woman. You do your job well, everybody likes you, you attract guys whether you want to or not..."

I shuddered at that part.

"...and you're my best friend."

"Uh, the boy part," I began nervously, "I don't have a boyfriend or anything, do I?"

She shook her head. "No, but it isn't from lack of interest on the boys' part. You've had a casual date here and there, but nothing serious. You're between boyfriends right now. By the way, you apparently dropped out of Oklahoma State after two years because of a failed romance. As the story goes, I knew you in college, but I dropped out

to go to work and ended up in Ovid. That's just a story, though. I've only been here about six months, but Andrea was here before I arrived. I told you about a job in Ovid, and here you are."

"Okay," I summarized, "so I'm a college dropout, a hot babe, half Indian and a glorified secretary."

"That about sums it up," she agreed. "Remember, I fit that description, too, except for the Indian part, and I can tell you, life isn't too bad here. I don't think I would want to give up Ovid and go back to the rat race again."

"That's fine for you," I told her, "but you've always been a girl. I haven't, so I don't think I'm going to have much fun being pawed on by every guy in town."

She grinned wickedly. "Don't be so sure. You wouldn't be the first former man to find out it's more fun on this side of the fence."

"Yeah, right."

"Look," she said, standing up, "we're supposed to be friends. Why don't you let me show you the ropes? I can help you play the role and you can decide for yourself what to do from there."

"Okay," I said hesitantly, "but no guys. We can be friends, but don't try to set me up with a guy. I would feel really queer."

She put out a slender hand. "It's a deal."

"Okay," I agreed, holding out a hand no larger than hers. "It's a deal."

Andrea and I spent the evening together, talking about Ovid and about my situation. It was an informative conversation, and as we fixed a quick dinner consisting of chicken and a salad, I began to have a pretty good grasp of what was happening in Ovid. Apparently, the town had been created out of nowhere by the Judge and his cohorts. The entire town was less than two years old, but most of the residents didn't know that. Most of the residents were shades. A shade, it turned out, was some sort of supernatural being that thought of itself as being a person but really wasn't. No one knew for sure what they were.

The rest of the town's population consisted of transformed people. Most had just wandered into town and been arrested by Officer Mercer, who seemed to be the only police officer in the town. Once changed, only about a quarter of the people remembered their old lives. The rest were as clueless as the shades seemed to be. Men were often changed into women and vice versa. Others had been changed into animals and even plants, but that treatment seemed to be reserved for a select few who had committed most heinous crimes.

"So why don't the people who remember start a little revolution or something?" I asked between bites of chicken. I was actually starting to feel human again. I had changed into a sweater and jeans, so I didn't feel quite so out of place.

"It's not that easy," Andrea explained. "I can talk to you about this because we're alone. If someone else walked into the room right now, we couldn't discuss this at all. It's a little hard to start a revolution under those circumstances."

"Then why hasn't someone fled town and told the authorities?"

"Told them what?" she asked. "That there are some strange beings with great magical powers who changed them into someone else in a small town in Oklahoma that doesn't really exist?"

"I see your point," I admitted. Anyone who tried to do that would be locked away for sure.

"Besides," she went on, "you can leave town any time you want."

"You can?" That meant I might be able to get a message back to Admiral Nepper. There was a faint possibility that I could make him believe what had happened in Ovid.

"Sure," she said smiling. "You can do it just as soon as you've accepted your new identity. That's another one of the little rules."

"Oh." So I had to accept being Holly Sheridan to leave town. That didn't sound like much of a deal. There had to be another way. "So, another subject. Who is the Judge anyway?"

"That I can't tell you," she replied as she finished off her chicken. "Are

you finished? Here, I'll put everything in the dishwasher."

I handed her my plate. "What do you mean you can't tell me?"

She shrugged. "It's just another rule. If I tried to tell you, my voice would freeze up. If I tried to write it down, the muscles in my hand wouldn't work. You'll figure it out pretty quickly, though. Everybody does. It's just a little game the Judge likes to play."

I helped her with the dishes. It was funny, but Andrea really was starting to really become a good friend. Like many guys, I had never counted any women among my good friends. I don't mean to say that I saw women as nothing but sex objects. I was a bit more nineties than that. It was just that I had never spent much time around them except as co-workers or as dates. I had two brothers, but no sisters. When I got to the Naval Academy, there were some women around, but it was still mostly men. Then, in flight school, there were again a few women, but not very many. As a result, I had not had the chance to know women as contemporaries.

Then, in the Navy, there were women in our squadron, but the Navy has some very strict rules on relationships between the sexes. Often, the best way to stay within the rules is to keep your distance from them socially. I always stayed within the rules.

So as a hotshot jet pilot, the majority of the women I had gotten to know well were potential conquests. It tended to color my opinion of women. Now, I was one, so my friends would be mostly people like Andrea. It was a hard road to walk, but if they were all like Andrea, I thought I could do just fine.

When we had finished with the dishes, I asked, "So what happens tomorrow? I mean, I don't know anyone at work." I had to make sure I didn't slip and recognize Eric Vulman. After all, I wasn't supposed to know him. "And I really don't know what to do or even how to dress."

"Well, most of the stuff will come to you as you need it," she told me, sitting next to me on the couch in the living room. "When you get up in the morning, just relax and let yourself go. If you try to blank out your mind, you'll find that your body automatically does everything it's

supposed to do. As far as knowing people, I'll try to identify them for you during the day. The ones who remember who they used to be will cut you some slack. They know what you'll be going through. Just relax and try to have a good time of it."

"Sure," I grumbled. "I don't even know how to pee as a girl." I suddenly realized I needed to do that, but the sensation was coming from inside my body instead of from the penis. Of course. How could it be otherwise? I didn't have one of those things anymore. "Uh... so how do I pee as a girl?"

"How did you pee as a guy?" she asked.

"Well, I just stood, aimed and let go."

She grinned. "It's the same for you now—all except the aiming part, so it might be better if you sat down."

"Thanks a lot," I told her, jumping up to go into the head... er... bathroom.

"And don't forget to wipe!" she called cheerily.

Some old habits die hard, I realized when I returned to the living room. We had decided to watch a little TV before bed. Since we had cable TV, there were plenty of choices to watch, and with as much male as I could still muster, I began flipping through the channels.

"Settle on something," Andrea complained. "I don't care what."

I stopped flipping when I came to a movie I had always enjoyed. It was a movie called *Clash of the Titans*. It was a simple piece of fluff that starred Sir Laurence Olivier as Zeus and... Wait a minute, I thought. Ovid was a Roman poet. That much I had remembered. Zeus was for all practical purposes the same as the Roman god Jupiter. I looked over at Andrea who was obviously bored with the movie.

"Do you mean that the Judge is really Ju... Ju... Ack!" I choked.

She smiled. "You came up with that pretty fast. I think you've got the right idea. Don't try to say it, though. Don't you remember what I told

you? We can't talk about that."

I remembered something else from Roman mythology while my vocal chords returned to normal—or at least to female normal. Vulcan was the son of Jupiter. Vulman was only one letter different from Vulcan. That meant Eric Vulman was one of them, too. And what about Admiral Nepper? He knew Eric Vulman. Nepper—Neptune. Oh my god! Or maybe I should have said 'oh my gods!'

It was all starting to make a perverse sense now.

"So we can't talk about it at all?" I managed to say.

"Well," she drawled, "there's always a way. As long as you don't try to mention their names, you can carry on an oblique discussion."

"So," I began, looking her straight in the eye, "if I were to ask something about why these... beings are doing what they're doing, you could still answer the question?"

"If I knew the answer," she pointed out. "Nobody really knows why they're doing all of this. Maybe they have some cosmic reason for it, or at the other extreme, maybe this is just their idea of an amusement park. That would make Ovid some sort of a metaphysical Disneyland. Or maybe the answer is somewhere in between."

Just think of what they could do if they wanted to, I told myself. They had the power to transmute matter itself, all without any apparent mechanisms. They thought it and it became real. I wondered if they all had the power or just the Judge. I tried to remember my mythology. Stories often talked about the gods turning someone into something else, but a specific god wasn't always mentioned. It seemed like it was usually Jupiter who transformed others and sometimes himself. There was the woman who had changed a man into a stag. What was her name? Dinah? No—Diana. Or maybe it was Diane with an 'e.'

"Well, it's late and we both have to go to work in the morning," Andrea announced, breaking my train of thought. "Your nighties are in the second drawer of your dresser."

"Nighties?"

There was that grin again. “Unless you’d rather sleep in the nude.”

I shook my head, feeling the long hair tickle my neck and ears. “No, but don’t I have any pajamas?”

“Oh, they’re probably in there, too,” she said lightly.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” I asked with a frown.

Laughing, she gave me a sisterly hug. “You know, I’ve known guys like you were before. They were military pilots instead of civilians like you, but the mindset is the same. You’re all macho and act like you should be Indiana Jones or something. I guess I’m just having fun watching you try something really hard, like being a girl. I’m sorry, though. I shouldn’t get my jollies out of this. It’s just that it’s so cute watching you try to figure all of this out.”

“Unfortunately, with a body like this, everything I do seems to be cute,” I groaned.

There were, indeed, pajamas in the drawer, but that didn’t make me feel much better. They were soft and silky with lacy trim, and their color—light pink—didn’t help. I sighed with resignation and stripped down to get into them.

There, alone and nude in my bathroom, I had the first good look at my entire body. I could be a centerfold, I realized. I was going to have to beat guys off with a stick. My new body was going to look sexy in baggy jeans and a sweatshirt. I supposed I could cut my hair, but it wouldn’t really help. No one would mistake me for a guy no matter what I did. Besides, I still had a job to do.

Or did I? As I crawled into bed, I began to wonder. Had I been lured to Ovid just to be changed into this Indian bombshell? If that was the case, why all the phony identity crap? Why not send Lieutenant Richard Baxter into Ovid and change him instead of the elaborate Mike Donovan story. No, they were serious about my mission. Admiral Nepper and Eric Vulman might be part of the pantheon of Roman gods, but they needed my help. Maybe that could be my ticket back to my old life. With that happy thought, I drifted off to sleep.

“Hey! It’s six o’clock, Sleeping Beauty.”

“Mmph,” I managed to utter. I felt strange. Everything felt different. There was flesh where there shouldn’t be flesh, and there wasn’t flesh where there should be. Then, there was this twisted mass of hair around my face... Then, I woke up enough to remember what had happened to me. I was a girl. Damn.

To make matters worse, I was going to have to convince everyone I met today that I really was Holly Sheridan. It wasn’t going to be easy. Getting out of a dress and nylons hadn’t been that hard, but getting into them? And what about makeup? I would be expected to wear it, but I didn’t have the foggiest notion how to apply it. I was going to really need some help. Thank god (or was it gods?) for Andrea.

“Take a shower and we’ll get you ready,” Andrea told me, reading my mind it seemed.

We each had a private bathroom, so all I had to do was pad in, strip down and shower, stopping first for a trip to the head. It seemed as if this new body wasn’t nearly as forgiving about holding urine. When I had to go, I really had to go. ‘Who designed these crazy female bodies anyway?’ I thought unhappily.

I carefully washed off my new body. Maybe some men put in my situation would have used the occasion to do a little exploring, maybe even a little autoeroticism, but not me. I washed off my body as if it were a house of cards, unwilling to touch too forcefully. This wasn’t my body, I thought. Not really, anyhow. My body was male. I had to think of this body as just part of my cover in my mission. Maybe that was really all it was. Yes, that was it! As soon as I finished my mission, they would change me back. That had to be it. I actually felt a little better. I could do this temporarily.

“Are you going to take all day in there?”

I looked up and saw Andrea staring at me through the glass shower

door. I quickly grabbed a towel that I had hung over the door and attempted to cover myself.

“What are you doing?” she laughed. “You haven’t got anything I haven’t got. Forget the modesty.”

Embarrassed, I turned off the water and dropped the towel to a less modest position.

“Hmm...” she said. “On second thought, you may not have anything I haven’t got, but you’ve certainly got a lot more of it.”

“Thanks a bunch,” I grumbled.

“Look, save the long showers for later when you know how to get ready. We need to get you ready to go or we’re both going to be late. Here, take this.”

She held out a pill to me. “What is it?” I asked suspiciously.

“A vitamin,” she said simply. “We girls need our iron.”

I took it and washed it down with a paper cup of water.

She had already picked out an outfit for me and spread it out on the bed. It consisted of a tan bra and panties, panty hose, a beige knit blouse and a very pale green single breasted women’s suit made out of some silky material. I held up the skirt. I was afraid it wouldn’t even cover my crotch. “Couldn’t you find anything shorter?” I asked sarcastically.

“You’ll want to fit in, won’t you?” she asked.

Reluctantly, I nodded.

“Well, this is the type of outfit Holly usually wears. That’s an 18-inch skirt, so you’ll be right in style. Now get dressed. We need to work on your makeup and we haven’t got much time.”

When Andrea had finished with me, I was an absolute knockout. I was going to have to consider myself lucky if I didn’t get attacked by the first man at Vulman Industries who spotted me. My suit was professional in cut, but it did nothing to hide an incredible figure that

included a 36C rack on a five foot four inch frame. Legs? Oh, they were unbelievable. They were the kind of legs that Hollywood studios used to insure, and in the two-inch ivory heels that I wore, they couldn't have looked better.

Andrea agreed to go light on the makeup and easy on the jewelry. I wore a dainty gold chain necklace and a thin gold bracelet. My long hair pretty much covered the small gold rings in my ears. Even with light makeup though, my dark brown eyes, thick lashes and prominent cheekbones gave me the face of a Victoria's Secret model.

"Your turn to drive," she told me, flipping me a set of keys as we walked out the door.

"How can I drive like this?" I asked, motioning to myself.

"It doesn't seem to stop other women," she said with a sigh. "You have to learn sometime. There aren't any buses in Ovid and it's a long walk to work in those heels."

My car turned out to be a little red Pontiac Sunbird. That seemed appropriate for someone who was half-Indian. After all, Pontiac had been an Indian chief and a Sunbird sounded vaguely Indian. The car had an automatic transmission, so I didn't need to worry about depressing a clutch pedal in heels. I found it actually was no problem to drive as a woman, but the shoulder harness did rub uncomfortably against my new breasts.

Andrea guided me to Vulman Industries. It turned out to be a fairly large building in the southwest part of town. The front of the building was a two-story brick office area with a larger cast concrete area behind it. The concrete area had to be the manufacturing area where the company made car parts. The entrance way was nicely landscaped with a pair of flagpoles, one displaying the US flag while on the other, the Oklahoma state flag flew. Or so Andrea told me. I wouldn't have known the Oklahoma state flag from the flag of Bangladesh.

As I pulled into the parking lot, I saw there were already perhaps a hundred or so cars parked with more seeking out spaces.

“How many people work here?” I asked Andrea.

“About two hundred,” she replied, “but we’re still hiring.”

The car parts business must be good, I thought. Now, if Vulman could finish development of the new aviation fuel pump and keep the final designs secret, Vulman could expect considerable growth.

I don’t think I was as nervous the first time I landed on a carrier deck as I was when I walked into Vulman Industries for the first time.

Everyone we met was friendly. There were cheerful greetings and waves from the parking lot to the front entrance. It was Thursday, but you would have thought none of these people had seen each other for several weeks the way they greeted each other. I had to say it appeared that morale at Vulman was good. Of course, the majority of the people I saw were shades. Still, they seemed to be genuine in their actions and not just automatons.

Andrea led me through the lobby, past the cheery shade receptionist, and down a hallway. The hall opened up into an administrative area, complete with an attractive desk and a visitor’s couch. Straight ahead, past the desk, were a pair of large oak doors. ‘Eric Vulman—President’ was written in gold on one of the doors. “This is your desk,” she told me. It figured. I was right. Executive Assistant was just another title for secretary.

I put my purse under the desk as I had seen so many other secretaries do and sat down with a sigh.

Andrea smiled. “Just relax. Eric is a nice guy. Remember, he’ll know you are new, so he’ll take it easy on you.”

I returned her smile to be friendly, but I didn’t feel like smiling. As she turned and walked off to her own desk in some other part of the building, I felt very alone. It was one thing to be Holly Sheridan around Andrea. Even though she had always been female, she at least knew what had happened to me. Now, I was to be surrounded by shades and transformed people who had no idea that Ovid was all a sham. They would expect me to act like the Holly Sheridan they had always known. I wasn’t sure I was up to the task.

I was startled as one of the large oak doors opened. There, in an expensive suit that made him look like the corporate executive he was, stood Eric Vulman. He smiled at me. "Holly, good. I'm glad you're here. Come on in. I have some things to go over with you."

I'm sure you do, I thought to myself, my fear subsiding as my temper rose. Here was one of the beings responsible for my condition, and he was speaking to me as if there was nothing out of the ordinary. I hoped that he could tell from my body language that I wasn't pleased, but I suspected it was hard to do swaying as I was in high heels.

He closed the door behind me and motioned me to a small round conference table. As I sat silently, he moved over to his credenza and began to prepare two cups of coffee. I supposed angrily that that would be one of my duties from then on. "Coffee?" he asked pleasantly.

"Please," I replied, trying to make it sound cold.

"I believe you like it black," he observed.

"No," I corrected him. Andrea and I had had a cup of coffee before leaving the apartment, so I knew how this body preferred coffee. "For some reason, since yesterday, I seem to prefer it light."

Refusing to rise to the bait, he poured in a little powdered cream and stirred it for me. He placed the cup in front of me, then sat down opposite me. "I'm sure you want to know what's going on," he said.

"Obviously."

"Okay," he agreed. "I'll tell you what I can. But there is one thing I can't tell you, and that is..."

"Who you are," I interrupted. "You're Vulcan." I was surprised that I was able to say it in front of him. Apparently that taboo didn't apply when you were alone with a god.

His eyebrows shot up sharply. "I can see our confidence in you has not been misplaced. You reasoned that out much sooner than most of our new residents do."

“I had a little help,” I replied, taking a sip of the coffee. It was just right. “The old movie *Clash of the Titans* was on last night.”

He laughed, “Still, to deduce who we were from watching a bunch of middle-aged actors strolling around in togas in that film was quite a feat. It makes things easier to explain, though.”

“So what is going on?” I asked. We might as well cut to the chase, I thought.

“It’s pretty much as I explained to you yesterday,” he replied. “Your mission is a real one. It’s just that the cover of Mike Donovan wouldn’t have allowed you to learn much. Whoever is leaking the information wouldn’t be very open around you. But now that you’ve joined the ranks of the transformed, you have a reason to not care for us.”

“That’s for sure.”

He looked at me sympathetically. “Please, Holly...”

“Do you have to call me Holly? You know who I really am,” I pointed out.

“I know who you really were,” he corrected me, a little sternly. “Look at yourself in the mirror. There is nothing left of Richard Baxter or Mike Donovan except memories. You are Holly Sheridan, and as far as most people you meet from now on, you always have been. In fact, Richard Baxter never existed.”

“What?”

He rose and went to his desk. Picking up a newspaper, he returned with it and placed it in front of me. It was a USA Today dated the previous morning. The headline read ‘Navy Jet Shot Down Over Iraq!’ There were pictures of Terry and me, and under them, the subhead read ‘2 Pilots Die.’ I looked up at him in confusion.

“This is what happened to you day before yesterday—or would have if we hadn’t recalled you. More than likely, the incident would have started another round of violence in the Middle East. You, of course, wouldn’t have been around to see it.”

“But this didn’t happen,” I protested. “This must be one of those phony papers you get printed up at the novelty shops.”

“But it would have happened,” he clarified, “if we had let events go on without intervening. You were going straight into an ambush. It happened anyway, but your two wingmen managed to avoid damage and knock out the SAM battery that caught you. You were a good pilot. You would have just been in the wrong place at the wrong moment in time.”

It could have happened, I realized. I was a good pilot—a very good pilot—but things happened in the air. They could have nailed me. I looked more carefully at the newspaper, suppressing a shudder. In that moment, I knew Eric was telling me the truth.

“Okay,” I said slowly, “so you saved me from death. So what do you mean when you said I never existed?”

Eric explained, “The way the rules are set up, when you become a citizen of Ovid, your previous existence is eliminated. It’s as if you never existed at all. If you were to call your parents right now, they wouldn’t know who you were. The Judge can override that temporarily, but it’s a strain even for him. In your case, Richard Baxter ceased to exist the moment you were transformed.”

“But I can be changed back, can’t I?” I asked. “I mean, I don’t have to stay like this forever, do I?”

“That would be up to the Judge,” Eric replied. “There have been times where he has performed a second transformation, but it doesn’t happen very often. There’s a significant chance that you’ll remain Holly Sheridan for the rest of your life.”

I felt as if he had just pronounced a death sentence on me. Everything I had ever been—everything I had ever worked for was gone. I enjoyed being a man, a pilot, and a Naval officer. All those things were lost to me now. I had been changed into someone I didn’t know how to be, and to be honest, I didn’t want to know how to be.

“I’m really sorry,” Eric told me, “but this was necessary. We thought

that a girl like Holly would be more non-threatening to our spy. As Holly, you'd be able to learn things you would never have learned in your male persona, whether that male was Richard Baxter or Mike Donovan."

"Then why the phony identity?" I wanted to know. "Why not just change me without Mike Donovan even being in the picture?"

"Because as a military officer, you'd be less likely to betray your country. Our spy or spies would be more wary around you. Once an officer, always an officer and all that. As a civilian pilot, though, you might be a little more open to any proposal they might make. They might think you're bitter enough about the transformation that you would be willing to join them."

I might at that, I thought to myself. I was a loyal American, but these people weren't Americans. Oh, they acted as if they were, but they were really gods from another time and place. If I helped them, was I really helping my country? Or was I just helping these ancient gods in whatever purpose they had conceived. I realized, though, that I would have to play along for the time being. What choice did I have? If I helped them, I could try to make sure I was really helping my country in the process. If I didn't help them, I would no longer be needed. I could be transformed again. I had no doubt that the next transformation would be to get me out of the way of the operation entirely. What would they change me into? A baby? An animal? I had no idea what the limits were, but I knew that unless I helped them, I would be in way over my head.

"So what do we do now?" I asked resignedly.

Eric relaxed noticeably. "More coffee?"

I nodded. "Please. Maybe I should get it though. I assume that's part of my duties."

"Yes," he agreed, pushing his cup toward me. "Perhaps you're right. It would look better."

When we both had fresh cups of coffee, he continued, "The team

putting together the chip for the fuel pump is actually pretty small. There are only five people there and two of them are shades.”

“Can a shade betray you?” I queried.

“We don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so? I thought you were gods.”

“We are,” he agreed, “but we aren’t omnipotent or omniscient. Read your mythology. People were always tricking the gods, and we were always tricking each other. We aren’t like the Christian god, all seeing and all knowing. Even he got fooled for a time by Adam and Eve. If we were all powerful, we wouldn’t need you to help us. We would just know who our spy was.”

It was actually comforting to know there were limits to their powers. Granted, they still had very impressive powers, but they couldn’t do everything.

“So really what I am is the bait,” I surmised. “You expect them to contact me to help them in their scheme.”

Eric nodded. “That’s right. They thought they had the right plans before, but there were no templates for the chip in their set. That was only because the final design for the chip hadn’t been made. We’re close now though, and they’ll know it. But they’ll want to make sure it does what it’s supposed to do. They’ll need a pilot for that.”

“Now wait a minute,” I protested, raising a feminine hand, “I won’t know if the chip works or not. I’m just a pilot.”

“True,” Eric agreed, “but they won’t know that. For a week now we’ve been telling everyone associated with the project that a pilot who is a computer expert employed by the contractor for the F-18 is going to determine the functionality of the chip. And of course, the Navy will be sending their own man to look at it, too. They won’t approach someone from the Navy, but I’m betting they’ll approach you.”

He got up suddenly and went over to his desk. He keyed an intercom and said, “Tricia, I’m sending Holly down there to get some employee files. Give her whatever she needs, okay?”

“Will do,” a voice came back.

“I want you to read over the files of everyone on the project,” he told me. “You’ll be expected to know all of them. Personnel is at the other end of this hall. Tricia will help you. She’s an attractive black woman, about thirty, with short hair. You and Tricia are good friends.”

“Is she real?” I asked, getting to my feet.

“Yes,” he replied. “She doesn’t remember being anyone else, though. That reminds me. If you look down at the bottom of the Employee Application Form in each file, you’ll see either one, two or three asterisks. One means a shade, two means a transformee who doesn’t remember his or her previous life, and three means that, like you, they remember.”

I gave him a grim smile. “How many asterisks are on your file?”

“None at all,” he said blandly.

Tricia greeted me as an old friend, but I suppose in her mind, that’s just what I was. I found after chatting with her for a couple of minutes that she really was a likeable person. I wondered who she had been before she came to Ovid. Was she a former man like me? Had she been black? Since she didn’t know herself, it was unlikely that I would ever find out. I began to realize that the best way to deal with the residents of Ovid was to see them as they saw themselves and not worry about who they had been before.

Was that how they would deal with me? Andrea and Eric knew who I really was, or at least, who I had been. Come to think of it, Andrea didn’t even know that. She only knew my cover identity. To everyone else, I was Holly Sheridan. To the shades and people like Tricia, I always had been Holly. Other transformees who at least knew they had been transformed would know that Holly was now real and no longer a shade, but it probably wouldn’t matter to them. I supposed Eric was right. In many ways, it was the perfect cover, but why they couldn’t have changed me into a man was beyond me. I could have been just as effective that way, I was sure.

Of course, there was the idea that I would cast my lot with the spies if they thought I was thoroughly disgusted with my change of sex. Maybe I should consider it, I thought. I owed these gods nothing. They had changed me against my will. They had taken away my career, my sex, everything that had made me Richard Baxter. What did I really owe them? My life? Only if I believed their story of my imminent death in the Gulf.

Still, I told myself, they had no reason to lie to me. They could have used another pilot were it not for their desire to use one who had been bound to die. If all they wanted was a pilot, surely they could have found one who could have tolerated becoming a woman. Hell, there was probably a pilot out there somewhere who would have jumped at the chance. I couldn't imagine who he would be, but it took all kinds to make a world.

Resigned at least for the moment to my situation, I returned to my desk with the personnel files I was to study. I had also grabbed my own file so I could learn more about my new self.

The first file I opened was the file of the team leader of the chip development project. His name was Darren Cache. His picture was in the file. He appeared young, no more than twenty-five. I wondered if it was an old picture, so I checked his birth date. No, in fact, he was only twenty-four. I guessed high tech leaders were often young. Gray hair and innovations in computers didn't seem to go hand-in-hand. There were two asterisks at the bottom of his file. That meant he didn't know who he had been before. He had dark hair, fair skin and blue eyes if the color of the picture was right. He was a handsome man. I wondered if he was married. I looked down at the file and was pleased to see that he was single.

Pleased to see that he was single? What in hell was wrong with me? My mind had been drifting in almost a trance. I had been thinking like... like... like a girl, damn it! What was I going to think about next? Shopping for some really cute clothes? Having babies? I had to focus my mind on who I was. I mean, who I really was—not who I appeared to be. Maybe the transformation was more than physical. The physical

aspects were scary enough.

I tried to concentrate on the files. No problems with the next file. The guy looked like a weasel. He was thirtyish, balding, and with a bushy moustache. He had dark skin—darker than mine—and dark brown eyes. His name was Randy Aziz. Aziz—wasn't that an Arab name? He was a shade, though. I suspected, as did Eric, that the culprit was not a shade. Surely the gods had better control than that on their artificial creations.

Whoa, Rich, I said to myself. I didn't really know enough about the shades to say that. Maybe they were just another form of intelligent life. Eric had said himself that the gods were not omnipotent. He might think a shade couldn't betray the gods, but what if he was wrong? Maybe shades could act up like the Yul Brynner robot in Westworld. Now there was a scary thought.

The next file belonged to a Meg Hartwell. She was real and apparently remembered who she had been. She looked to be about twenty-five with blonde hair and blue eyes. I would have to call her cute, I thought, trying to recall my male perspective, but nothing to write home about. If she had been male before, she might be angry enough at the gods to betray them.

Damon Greene was a black man and perhaps the oldest member of the team. He was thirty-five but his picture made him look older. He was real with no memory of a past life, but could he feel as if he had been passed over in favor of a younger Team Leader? Jealousy could be a motive for betrayal. He was also the only married member of the team. Money pressures could cause him to be a spy as well.

The final team member was Jeff Todd. He was the same age as I was now and a recent graduate of Capta College, which was apparently a local school. He was blonde with blue eyes and looked like the All-American boy. He was also a shade. Of all the team members, he seemed to be the least likely suspect. He looked too young and too inexperienced to be involved in anything like espionage. Of course, that could make him the perfect spy, too. Who knew how old the shades really were?

Finally, I came to my own folder. There I was, smiling in a picture that I had never posed for. I looked fantastic even in a cheapo employee ID photo. According to the folder, my birthday was in February, so I had just turned twenty-one. My parents were Brad Sheridan and Mary Lone Eagle Hansen, both conveniently dead. I was listed as being one-half Indian. I was apparently born in Tulsa, and I had a sister living in Dallas. I wondered what she was like, assuming she really existed (which I doubted). I had to give the gods credit—they were thorough.

Finished with the folders, I was suddenly bored. If I had still been my old self, I would have ploughed through all the adminstrivia with the help of a yeoman or two and would be looking forward to flight ops. No more soaring through the clouds for me, I realized with sadness. I looked down at the in-basket on my desk. There were other projects for Holly to do, it seemed. With a sigh of resignation, I began to go through them.

Most of the projects were mundane in nature, but at least I was gratified to see that Eric did give Holly meaningful projects. I was apparently responsible for a lot of the day-to-day administration. I wasn't treated like a receptionist, or even a secretary. The only phone calls that came back to me were important ones that had passed the receptionist's screening, so I wasn't deluged with salesmen's calls. I did have to do most of my own typing, though, but I found that if I let myself relax into an almost trance-like state, I was a whiz at the keyboard. Apparently, the spell on me worked a little like an autopilot on an aircraft. As long as the task wasn't too complex, I could do it without thinking.

Going through the in-basket, I saw that there was a meeting right after lunch that I would be expected to attend. I looked forward to it, for it was with the chip development team. It would give me a chance to assess each of them.

Andrea joined me for lunch, leading me to the small cafeteria in the building. We weren't able to talk about my true first day on the job, though. Tricia and a girl from payroll had joined us, so I was exposed

to my first dose of girl talk. Each of the girls talked about their husband or boyfriend. Tricia was married, and the payroll clerk, Renee, was a shade and was engaged. Andrea apparently had been seeing a lot of the bartender at that local bar I had spotted, Randy Andy's.

I was astounded at how openly each of the girls talked about sex. It was a good thing my Indian skin was slightly red or I would have had to explain my sudden rash of blushing to the other girls. I just kept my mouth shut and laughed when the other girls laughed. As a former man, I had no idea how openly women discussed their relationships with men. If I had known as a man, I would have probably suffered from performance anxiety a few times.

"All this talk reminds me to take my pill," Renee said suddenly, pulling a pill identical to the one Andrea had made me take that morning. She washed it down with iced tea. "There. No babies for a little while."

I gave Andrea an evil gaze. She had tricked me into taking a birth control pill!

She shrugged and said to Renee (but really to me, I realized), "Right. Better safe than sorry."

Finally, Tricia said, "How about you, Holly? You haven't said a word. Who are you seeing now?"

I gulped. Was I seeing anyone now? I had forgotten if Andrea had told me or not. I hoped I wasn't, but I didn't know. There was no way I was going to be caught dead dating a guy. I was one myself—inside, at least.

Andrea bailed me out, though. "Miss Sheridan is currently between men," she announced with mock formality.

"A lot of guys around here are going to be happy to hear that," Renee laughed. "They were afraid you and that car salesman would actually hit it off."

"Yeah," Tricia said, "we all heard he had a big engine under the hood."

They all laughed, and I even managed to fake a smile. I of course had

no idea who they were talking about, but I was secretly relieved that I didn't have a boyfriend to juggle along with all the other aspects of my new life.

"Maybe I can put a flyer in with everybody's check tomorrow," Renee teased. "That way, they'll know you're available, Holly."

"Just in the guys' envelopes," Andrea suggested with mischief in her eyes aimed only at me. "After all, Holly isn't into girls."

They all laughed again. I was relieved, though, that lunch ended without any more comments about my love life.

I got to the chip development team meeting a little late. I hadn't taken into account that going to the head as a woman was a much more significant chore. Instead of sauntering up to the urinal for a quick task, I had to adjust dress and pantyhose and panties. It was practically like having to get undressed and dressed again just to take a piss.

They were meeting in a small conference room when I walked in on them. Eric had told them I would be joining their afternoon meeting instead of him, so they were expecting me. It was the excuse I needed to meet all of them, although they didn't know that.

"Hi, Holly," Darren called out casually when I walked in. He was leaning back in his chair while tapping a pencil against the table. He was wearing what looked to me to be a very expensive suit, and the tie that was loosened at his neck cost at least a hundred. I know, because I had priced that same tie before the ship left on deployment. Everyone else echoed the friendly greeting. I smiled at everyone and took an unobtrusive seat at the foot of the table.

"Okay," Darren began, "everybody's here. We've still got a lot of work to do, so let's make this meeting a short one. Damon, how is the interface?"

"Ready to go," the black man said confidently. "All the computer simulations show we're right on target."

"How about the subroutines?"

Meg and Randy both said together, "Ready."

Then Meg added, "We still need to re-calibrate fuel flow in one of the nozzles, but that can be reset now at the user level instead of reprogramming."

Darren nodded his agreement. "Are there any other issues we need to go over before we produce the final blueprint for the chip?"

"I'd like to take one last look this afternoon at programmable user interfaces in general. There are a couple of areas I'd like to tweak," Randy commented. I noted his accent was pure Oklahoma. His ancestry might be Middle Eastern but he was obviously born and raised in the US. That was one point for him. He would probably have no close ties with a foreign family since he was a shade.

"Okay," Darren said. "Randy, you've got this afternoon to look at the interfaces. Get Jeff to help you. His subroutine is finished. Tomorrow, we start on the final design. We should have the final design by a week from today. That's next Thursday. Any problems with that?"

Nobody disagreed, but the deadline set off a series of technical problems which even with my engineering background were hard to follow. The solutions to the problems took over an hour.

When the last of the discussions ended, Darren smiled. "We've made terrific progress this last week. It calls for a little celebration. Everybody head over to Randy Andy's right after work. I'm buying the first round."

This met with general approval. Randy even chimed in, "And I'll buy the second round."

"You're invited, too, Holly," Darren said with a warm smile in my direction.

"I'll be there," I said. It would be a perfect opportunity to see them in an informal atmosphere, not that they were very formal in the meeting. My first impression of them was that they all got along extremely well. There seemed to be no conflicts or jealousy among the members of the team. I was hard-pressed to see any of them as a spy. Of course,

a successful spy doesn't exactly go around with a sign around his or her neck.

Meg hung back to talk to me after the others had left. She was better looking than her employee file picture, but still no raving beauty. Still, she had a nice figure which stood out through her white silk blouse and short navy-blue skirt. If I had met her as my male self, I would have been mildly interested, I had to admit. "Holly," she began hesitantly, "I just wanted to ask if you were feeling... different."

I knew what she was asking since I knew that she remembered who she had been. She was wondering if I remembered, too. "I feel fine," I replied carefully. The person I was supposed to be would have no reason to know about Meg, so I had to play dumb. "I just feel like a new person."

Meg grinned. Contact had been made. "I know how you feel."

"You do?"

"Look, Holly, a few of us remember who we were," she explained. "You're not alone. If you ever need any help getting settled in, let me know."

"Thanks," I replied. "My roommate has been a big help. I don't think I could have gotten through this without her."

"Oh, that's right," Meg said. "You share a place with Andrea, don't you?"

I nodded.

"Well, she's a good friend of mine," Meg explained. "The team has had to work closely with production on this project, and Andrea has been very helpful getting the specifications we needed. If she is half the help to you she's been to the team, you'll do fine. But if you need any help from me, just let me know."

"Uh, one thing," I told her. "I was just wondering. I'm a little new at being... well, at being a girl, to be honest. Andrea has always been one. Is there anybody you know who can help me with..."

“The emotional changes?” Meg asked.

I nodded.

She smiled at me. “Don’t worry. I’ll help you with that. Until last summer, I was a male software engineer working out of the Silicon Valley.”

“How did you end up here?” I asked.

“I was a big country western fan,” she explained. “I was driving to Branson, Missouri, for a week’s vacation and to see some of the country stars. I got stopped going through Ovid.”

“Speeding?”

She shook her head sadly. “No, drug possession. I was a pretty successful software engineer, so I had plenty of money to powder my nose. Don’t worry, that’s all in the past now. There are no drugs in Ovid, thank god.”

Or the gods, I thought, but she couldn’t say that.

“Anyhow,” she continued, “the next thing I knew, I was Meg Hartwell, girl software engineer.”

I was truly fascinated. This was the first opportunity I had had to talk to someone who had undergone the same sex change I had experienced. Let’s see, it was nearly April, so she had been a woman now for—what?—eight or nine months. She didn’t seem to be unhappy about it. Still, she could be hiding it, I thought. If she was unhappy with her new sex, she might be willing to spy on the project, either to get even or to strike a deal with a maverick god who would agree to change her back.

“So,” I began, “how has it been for you? I mean, how have you felt about being female?”

She gave me a knowing smile. “I remember asking someone that same question right after I got here. To be honest, I didn’t think I would ever get used to it. At first, I was so disoriented, I didn’t know what to do. The thought of wearing dresses and makeup was

repugnant. It seemed like being a transvestite. Then, after a few days, it started seeming more normal. Besides, I looked better when I dressed right and had the right makeup. When I looked better, I felt better.”

I had to admit I understood her point better than I would have before my transformation. There was a feeling of accomplishment when you put the whole attire and makeup thing together. It was almost like putting a puzzle together to admire the picture.

“Of course, the hormones kick in pretty quickly, too.”

“They do?” That wasn’t something I had thought much about. My body was producing female hormones. How much of an effect would they have on the way I acted and the way I thought? More than I wanted to admit to myself, I was sure.

“They do,” she affirmed. “Don’t be surprised if men start looking good to you.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, but I don’t think so.”

“Oh, it will happen,” she assured me. “It will be subtle at first, but before you know it, you’ll be looking at a man’s ass and build just like you used to look at breasts and legs.”

I silently prayed to god that she was wrong. There was one more question I needed to ask though. “Uh, Meg?”

“Yes?”

“Are you happy?”

She thought for a moment before answering. “Yes, I am. Looking back on it, as a man, I had pretty much made a hash of my life. This was my chance to start over. Once I got my bearings, I actually started to become comfortable with who I had become. Now, I guess I just want what a lot of other women want—a career, a family, and friends. Just go with the flow, Holly. Ovid can be a great place if you do that.”

Go with the flow, I repeated to myself as I went back to my desk. Was that what I was supposed to be doing? Sorry, that wasn’t my style.

What did I want? Meg had talked about a career. I had that, until they took it away from me. A family? That had never been very important to me. I wasn't close to my parents or my brothers, but I had to admit to myself that I would miss them. I wasn't ready to go out and find another family, though. As for friends, I had had them, too. I was developing new ones in Ovid, but I didn't want to get too close to them. I would figure out a way to regain my masculinity and leave Ovid as soon as my mission was complete.

But, I reminded myself, unless I appeared to be going with the flow, I'd stick out like the proverbial sore thumb. I needed to appear to be adapting or my cover wouldn't work. My best strategy would be to do my best to fit in and catch the spy. Then once I wasn't needed in Ovid anymore, I could work on getting out.

The rest of the afternoon dragged by. At least the offices closed at four thirty instead of five. Still, the last hour at my desk was almost painful. I saw nothing further of Eric that day. On his calendar, he was signed out for meetings. I knew, though, that he was out playing golf with the Judge. I envied him.

Just before four thirty, Andrea walked in. "Ready to go?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, collecting my purse. Then I remembered Darren's offer of a drink at Randy Andy's. It would be a great opportunity to talk to the team, so I really had to go. "I forgot, Andrea. I'm having a drink with Darren and his team. I can drop you off at home first, though."

"Don't bother," she laughed. "I got invited, too. I'm kind of an honorary team member."

Andrea and I were the first from Vulman to arrive at Randy Andy's, but the place had plenty of other customers already. Some of them looked like they had been there since the sun came up. The bar itself was cleaner than most small town bars. I knew because as a pilot, I was an expert on bars, small town and otherwise. It was just as dark as most small town bars, though, with dim lights and pinewood walls that absorbed a lot of the light. It was arranged in typical bar fashion with a long bar flanked by several tables of various sizes. A second room

contained a few booths and a pool table.

The only atypical feature of the bar was a lack of cigarette smoke. I wondered if cigarettes were as hard to obtain as drugs. It didn't matter to me. As a non-smoker, I would be happy to learn that the gods had kicked Joe Camel's ass out of town. Still, without the smell of stale cigarette smoke, the place didn't seem natural. I had to make do with a stale beer smell and there was plenty of that. It was odd, but since my sex change, even my sense of smell had changed. I found myself attracted to floral scents and turned off by the bar smells I had come to enjoy as a man.

There was another difference, at least for me, when Andrea and I walked into the bar. That was that all the men in the place turned around to look at us. Andrea didn't seem to pay much attention, but I felt as if my clothes were being mentally stripped from my body. I had a sudden urge to tug on my skirt to make it longer and fold my arms over my breasts to make them less obvious. It didn't work, though. The men continued to stare. Had I done that when I was male? Probably.

We staked out a large table and braced ourselves as a few of the braver men, their courage fortified by a couple of hours at the bar, started to slowly sidle our way. The strange mixture of country western music and rock that spewed out of the jukebox made it hard to hear what some of the men were saying, but between songs and a low spots in the music, I kept hearing phrases like "great ass" and "nice tits." Needless to say, I felt very uncomfortable.

Fortunately, the rest of the gang from work showed up before we could even order drinks. Everyone arranged themselves around the table. Darren sat next to me and grinned at me. "Thanks for getting a table. I was afraid there wouldn't be a big one left when we got here."

No chance of that, I thought. Many of the tables were still empty, although the place was filling fast.

"What'll it be, guys?" a raspy voice said with a thick Oklahoma drawl. I looked up and saw a man in black trousers and a white shirt. He was

tall and thin, with a receding hairline and a hawkish nose. He wasn't homely, but his features gave him an almost weasel-like appearance.

"Coors for me, Marty," Darren said. "What about the rest of you?"

A chorus of "Beer!" came up from everyone, including me.

"Better make it pitchers, Marty," Darren said. "Let's start with three."

Three pitchers for seven of us, and that was what Darren considered the first round. Apparently, we were going to have a party. That was fine with me. I had downed pitchers of beer in Officer's Clubs and civilian bars on four continents. A little sex change wasn't going to cramp my style.

It was a good party. After we had made short work of Darren's pitchers, Randy paid for the refills. Meg chipped in for some nachos, which I suspected would be as close as any of us came to eating dinner for a while. Randy playfully kissed Meg for ordering food, earning him the temporary nickname of Randy Randy. Damon picked up the next round but had to leave early to make it to his son's soccer game. Jeff was trying to teach Andrea an old college drinking song. In general, it was a good party—one that made it hard to imagine that any of these people could be a spy.

I was almost on familiar turf, sitting in the bar, a beer in hand and plenty more to come. I could almost imagine myself back in my old body, having a few beers back at the club with the other pilots. Of course there were many differences, some subtle and some not so subtle. When I would turn my head to talk to someone else at the table, I could feel the sway of the earrings in my ears and the brush of long hair on my cheeks. When I brought the beer glass to my lips, I could see it clutched in a small hand with painted nails. Then there was the constant problem with my skirt riding up as I shifted in my seat. I had to remember to tug it back in place periodically. The sound of my voice was still disconcerting, too. I would get wrapped up in the conversation and decide to add a point, only to be shocked at the high pitch of my voice.

Then, there were the not so subtle reminders. It seemed like every

time a slow song came up on the jukebox, some guy would come up, try to introduce himself, and ask me to dance. I politely declined each offer, more than a little embarrassed at the whole idea of dancing with a man.

Andrea was getting a chuckle out of the whole thing. As attractive as she was, guys were practically pushing her out of the way to talk to me. Of course, part of the time, they didn't have to. Andrea spent a fair amount of time out of her seat next to me talking with the bartender.

"They're an item," Meg explained to me.

The bartender, who went by the nickname of Deuce Meg told me, was a good-looking guy. Even if I hadn't been forced to see him from the female perspective, I would have known that. He was dark featured—black hair and goatee, dark brown eyes, and an olive complexion. He appeared to be about mid twenties, and from the muscles bulging out from the Randy Andy's T-shirt he wore, he obviously kept himself in good shape. The bar didn't need a bouncer when it had a bartender like Deuce. I also noted that he was real.

Finally, too much beer and too much sitting took their toll. I had to go to the head. I dreaded doing so. It had been so easy to drink beer as a man. I could be in and out of the head in less than a minute. Now, though, it was a major project. Still, it could wait no longer. The pressure in my bladder was building fast. I was finding to my chagrin that as a woman, when you had to go, you really had to go.

The heads were not exactly conveniently located. To reach them, I had to walk back through the pool room. There, playing a game of eight ball, were two men who looked as if they had just stepped out of the movie *Deliverance*. One was as homely as the other, for they were identical twins. They both wore dirty T-shirts and jeans, and there were two denim jackets on the stools next to them. I don't think they dressed so nearly alike on purpose. Rather, they just would never have had the style to dress in any other way. I would have guessed their ages at mid-twenties and their occupations as something which kept them in fairly decent shape in spite of the beer they were guzzling. The only real difference between them was that one of them

was real and the other was a shade.

“Hey, pretty lady,” one of them called to me. I didn’t know which one. I had been trying to rush past them.

Before I could reach the head, a pool cue came down in the doorway like a tollgate. I looked around, and up into the eyes of one of the twins—the real one.

“Well now, Pocahontas, it wasn’t too friendly of you not to talk to my brother and me,” he said in mock friendliness.

“Yeah,” his shade brother agreed. “Not friendly at all.”

“Hello Jed, Ted,” a familiar voice said suddenly behind me. A hand reached by me and gently pushed the pool cue aside. I looked around to see Darren, a thin smile on his lips as he looked each of the twins in the eye.

“Hello, Darren,” both twins replied, respectfully but obviously not happy to see him. As I looked at each of them, I could see that they were not willing to challenge him. I wondered why. There were two of them and only one of Darren.

“Well, if you’ll excuse us, I think the lady and I need to do a little resting.”

They both backed away. “Sure thing, Darren,” the real one said.

I was so curious as to why they backed down that I didn’t think twice about using the head. Everything about it just seemed natural. I even remembered to wipe the way Andrea had taught me. I dressed quickly, hoping Darren would still be outside the door to the head. Gentleman that he was, he had waited for me. With a silent smile to me, the two of us walked back to the main room past a very disgruntled set of twins.

“They’re the Borland twins,” Darren explained. “Jed and Ted. Neither one of them is very bright.”

I realized that, but I also realized they didn’t have to be very bright to do what they had in mind.

“They seemed to be a little afraid of you,” I noted.

He nodded. “I have a reputation of being pretty good in a fight,” he said in a tone so conversational that it didn’t sound like bragging.

The party continued, but with a subtle change. I found myself inching toward Darren and talking with him more. It was partially protective coloration. I wanted it to look like I was with him so the other men in the bar would leave me alone. But it was partially something else as well. Darren had been my protector, and I found that I didn’t mind having one. The more I saw him in action, the more I liked him. He was fairly quiet, thoughtful, and seemed to exude an air of self-confidence. He was something like a pilot without the swagger.

We talked mostly party small talk. It was really more of a group discussion than a one-on-one conversation, but I found myself enjoying it. In the short time I had been female, I had seen a lot of men spending more time staring at my breasts than really talking to me. When Darren turned in my direction, though, it was as if I had his full attention as a person. His eyes were locked on mine.

One by one, the party began to break up. My stomach was uncomfortable from too much beer and junk food. Besides, I knew this smaller body of mine would have less tolerance for alcohol, so I resolved to quit before I had had too much. I suspected, though, that I had already come close to reaching that point.

Andrea had decided to stick around for awhile. Meg told me that Deuce was getting off at ten, so I knew why Andrea was staying. I wished everybody who was left a pleasant evening and got unsteadily to my feet.

“Are you going to be okay?” Darren asked me.

“Just fine,” I slurred a little. “I’ll drive slowly.” I wondered what the Judge would do if I was brought into his court for driving while impaired. I resolved to drive really really carefully.

The clear evening air felt good on my face as I walked out to my car. Since it was early spring, the evenings were still crisp. I sucked in a

cool breath, enjoying the relative quiet as the noise from the jukebox receded. I fumbled with my keys, trying to get my car door open.

I was new to being a girl. That was my only excuse. Someone raised as a girl would have known to be careful in a dark parking lot. Since I was raised male, I never thought to look around for someone lurking in the shadows. My first indication that I was in trouble happened when I felt two large arms grab me at the waist from behind. Involuntarily, the air left my lungs as I let out a gasp.

“Well, well, Pocahontas, what are you going to do now?” I recognized the voice. It was one of the twins, Jed or Ted. From the arms that held me, I could see it was the real one, whichever one that was. The shade twin came into view as well, an evil grin on his ugly face.

I might have been slow to recognize the danger I faced walking out into the dark parking lot, but I wasn’t slow when it came to understanding what those two semi-retards had in mind for me. I had been a girl for less than two days and I was about to be raped.

Thankful for the self-defense training I had received in the Navy, I dug in my heels and tried to flip my assailant over my shoulder. If I succeeded, I might just have enough time to get in my car. To my shock, it didn’t work and I nearly lost my balance. It was a combination of factors, I realized at once. First, high heels are a poor shoe to be wearing when you’re trying to throw someone. Next, I hadn’t allowed for the fact that I was much smaller and weaker. And finally, I panicked, struggling futilely.

“Well it’s not Pocahontas after all,” the shade twin laughed. “It’s Judo Judy.”

Both men were laughing so hard, they didn’t even see the first kick. I tried to jump back as a leg came flying out of nowhere, knocking the shade twin to the ground. A dark shape hit the ground, rolled and came to his feet. It was Darren. “Let her go, Jed,” he growled from a low crouch.

Jed didn’t have to be asked twice. I felt his arms sag and fall away from me. I nearly fell to the ground as he retreated. I thought Darren

was just going to let them run away, but before they could both get their balance, a car, headlights on high with a red light flashing on top blocked their way.

“Stop where you are,” a calm but forceful voice called to them, stepping out of the police cruiser so quickly I never saw the door open or close. I did recognize the voice, though. Silhouetted in the bright lights of the cruiser was Officer Mercer.

The twins saw that he hadn’t bothered to draw his gun, so foolishly, they decided to make a run for it. Officer Mercer moved so quickly, he was a soft blur in the lights. In seconds, both of the twins were on the ground semiconscious.

“Do you need any help with them, officer?” Darren called.

“No. Thank you for asking, sir,” Officer Mercer said respectfully. “If you’d just take care of the young lady, I would appreciate it.”

I shook my head and raised an arm in protest. “No... no, I’m fine. I just need to go home.”

I tried to make it to my car, but my legs nearly collapsed from under me. Darren caught me as I began to fall, my breasts pressing against his chest. What was wrong with me? I wondered as I rested limply against him. I was shaking like the proverbial leaf. I was light headed and weak in the knees. I was a pilot, damn it! I had landed planes on carrier decks, faced the enemy in the skies above the Middle East, and accomplished dangerous feats for years. Yet here I was, unable to control myself. To make it worse, in frustration, I began to cry. Cry, for god’s sake!

Darren misunderstood the cause of my tears. He held me even closer to him and said softly, “Don’t worry, Holly, you’re all right. They won’t bother you anymore.”

For some reason, that made me cry even harder. He was talking to me like I was a weak girl. He was holding me as if I needed to be comforted. None of this was true, was it? Was it? God, what was happening to me? I was a man in a woman’s body, but mentally, I was

still a man. I had to be. I couldn't lose myself in this soft vessel, I thought. I had to get control of myself.

At last, I was able to stop the tears.

"Give me your keys and I'll drive you home," Darren offered.

I managed to pull away from him and stand a little steadier. "No, I can drive. I'll be fine."

"Look, I want to drive you home," he insisted. "I only live a couple of blocks from you. I can walk home. Then, you can pick me up in the morning and bring me over here to pick up my car. I'd feel better knowing you made it home okay."

"Well..." I drawled slowly. I had to admit I would feel safer if someone was with me. I had never had the experience of fear of being sexually assaulted before. It gave me a new appreciation for what girls go through. Every dark corner could hold a potential attacker. I suddenly realized that I didn't want to go back to my dark apartment all by myself. I wanted someone else there when I opened the door. "All right."

"You know," he said when we were in the car driving home, "there are better moves you could make."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," he apologized. "I was talking about the way you tried to bring Jed down."

I had been pretty good at self-defense training in flight school. "What do you mean?" I asked indignantly.

"Well, the move you tried on him would have worked fine if you were my size, but you would have to be a lot stronger to make that work while you were standing in heels," he explained.

"And you know a better way?" I asked coolly. Unfortunately, I knew he was right.

"Well, better for someone your size," he amended. "Hey, tomorrow is casual day. Why don't you wear something you wouldn't mind getting

roughed up and I'll show you what I mean over the noon hour."

"Are we going to fight it out in the parking lot?" I asked sarcastically.

"No," he said, smiling, "but you'll see."

He saw me to my door and waited while I turned on the lights.

"Do you want me to look around?" he asked.

I smiled. "No, thanks. I'll be fine."

He took my hand gently. "Then I'll say goodnight. Pick me up about a quarter until eight?"

"Sure," I agreed. Then, before he could turn away, I did something impulsively that I never dreamed I would do. I leaned over from the doorstep and gave him a sisterly kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, Darren."

With a surprised look on his face, he replied, "Sure. Any time."

As I closed the door behind me, I wondered if there was any way I could kick myself. What was I thinking of, giving him that little kiss? Was I turning gay? Well, not gay, I rationalized. After all, no matter what I was in my mind, I was a very pretty girl on the outside. Maybe it was just that autopilot thing kicking in again. That had to be it, I told myself. After all, there was no way I would have voluntarily kissed him, even in the innocent fashion I had done. No way in the world.

Besides, Darren wasn't just a co-worker or a friend. He was a suspect in a case of industrial espionage which was potentially damaging to the country I had sworn an oath to protect. I couldn't get involved with him, even if I wanted to, which I didn't. I was sure I didn't want to get involved. I was very sure. I was positive. I kept telling myself that almost as a mantra as I went to bed.

"Time to get up!" Andrea was just too damned cheery in the morning. I groaned and stretched, feeling the uncomfortable sway of my breasts as I sat up.

"So what time did you come in? I didn't even hear you," I told her,

swinging myself out of bed.

“Let’s just say you were dead to the world when I came in,” she laughed. “By the way, it’s casual day today, so dress accordingly.”

“Yes, I know,” I replied. “Darren told me. What should I wear?”

Andrea helped me pick out an outfit. It consisted of jeans and a denim shirt. I had thought it would make me look less feminine, but no such luck. When I looked in the mirror, I could see the outfit was designed to compliment my curves, not hide them. With my long black hair and Indian features, I looked like something out of a Western movie. Oh well, I sighed, I might as well go all the way for that look. I slipped on a black belt with a large turquoise buckle and black boots with a two-inch heel and turquoise earrings.

“You know what you really need to set that off,” Andrea commented as I struggled with my makeup, “is one of your fetish necklaces.”

I turned. “One of my what?”

“Fetish necklaces,” she repeated. “Oh, quit thinking like a man. I don’t mean that kind of fetish. Lots of women wear fetish necklaces. They have little stone carvings of bears and other animals that have magical powers according to Indian legends. Some Indian you are.”

“I’m only half-Indian,” I corrected.

“Then it must be the clueless half,” she joked.

“Hey, it’s hard enough to figure out how to be a girl. I’ll figure out how to be an Indian later.” I sincerely hoped there wouldn’t be a later. Maybe if this mission went well, I could convince the Judge to change me into a man again.

I put on the fetish necklace. She was right. It was perfect for my outfit. I may have wanted to be a man again, but I still managed to take a certain amount of pride in the fact that I made a dynamite-looking woman. I was beautiful and a little exotic.

“Come on,” she urged. “We’ve got to get to work. My turn to drive.”

“Oh!” I interjected. “I almost forgot. We have to pick up Darren.”

“Why?”

“He drove me home last night and left his car at the bar,” I explained.

“Oh?” There was a sly note of curiosity in her voice.

“Don’t get any ideas,” I told her, blushing. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you on the way to work. Do you know where he lives?”

“His address is in the employee directory. I can find it,” she replied.

It was only three blocks, but I managed to get the basics of the story explained to her. She was duly sympathetic. “Those boys have been headed for a fall for a long time. They’re mean and nasty. I’m not sure why the powers that be put up with them. Maybe this time, they’ll do something about them.”

I could only hope.

Darren was waiting for us in front of his house. His house turned out to be a very nice ranch style home, well landscaped and freshly painted. As we pulled up, I could see the edge of a swimming pool in his large back yard. He seemed to be doing pretty well for himself. By Ovid standards, it was quite a nice house.

“Here, I’ll get in back,” I offered. Andrea drove a little Escort coupe, so there wasn’t much room in the back seat.

“Don’t bother,” he replied, sliding into the back seat and resting his legs across the entire seat. “See? I’ll do fine. Did you sleep okay last night?”

“Like a baby,” I said truthfully.

“Good. Don’t forget to come by my office at lunch.”

“I won’t.” I didn’t really think he would have much to teach me about self-defense, but I did want to get to know him better. I mean, he was a suspect and I owed it to the mission to get to know everything I could about him.

Darren’s car was impressive. He had a white Corvette, brand new. He really was doing well for himself. I had priced the new ones. As I let

him out, I started thinking. Darren didn't remember who he was, but that didn't mean he couldn't be the spy. The motive could have easily been money. He obviously liked to live well, and I began to wonder if his salary was sufficient to afford all of his toys. I decided to take another look in his file and see how much he earned.

"Thanks, girls," he said brightly as he got out. Then, before I could stop him, he gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. "See you at lunch."

"Wow!" Andrea said with a wicked grin as we drove away. "For somebody who hasn't been a girl very long, you work fast."

"Oh," I mumbled, blushing, "it's nothing, really. He just helped me out of a jam. That was just a little brotherly peck."

"The kiss may have been brotherly," she commented, "but the look in his eyes wasn't. Come to think of it, you had that same look."

"That's ridiculous!" I protested. "I'm not interested in him at all. I mean, he's a guy."

"And you're a girl. So what's the problem?"

"I'm not all girl," I said, folding my arms in disgust, trying to ignore the swell of my breasts.

"Don't be too sure," she warned. "I've seen other guys become girls and get to like it. Look at Meg. When she first got here, she was just like you. Now, you'd never know she was ever male."

I didn't argue. I knew there was a real risk that my entire psyche was changing. It was only my second morning as a woman, but it had seemed much more natural. I was beginning to think nothing of unconsciously walking in heels and touching up my makeup. Sitting to pee was still a pain, but I was managing to get the job done in less time. I was beginning to recognize that the person I had once been was being pushed back further and further in my mind, filtered by the constant demands of a female body. Someone once said you are what you eat. I didn't know about that, but I was starting to learn that you are who you are.

I was just getting ready to see Tricia and pull Darren's file again when

Eric called me into his office. He was dressed casually as well, but he looked every bit as professional in a polo shirt as he did in a suit. He limped over to his credenza and poured us each a cup of coffee.

"I thought that was my job now," I commented.

He grinned. "I suppose it is, but I like to think of myself as a liberal boss. How is your investigation going?"

We seated ourselves at his conference table and I began, "Well, it's going slowly. I haven't found anybody wearing a trench coat and dark glasses. The whole team seems to get along well together. No one seems unhappy or suspicious." I thought about Darren's lifestyle but decided not to mention it until I reviewed his file again.

Eric sighed, "We're having that same problem. Meg would be the most likely candidate from a purely pragmatic standpoint. She's the only real person on the team who remembers who she was before. She might bear us some ill will."

"Particularly since you changed her sex," I couldn't resist adding.

Eric stared at me. "Is it that terrible, being a girl?"

Was it? I should have been able to answer yes, it's terrible. Every time I put my hand between my legs and feel nothing but a slit, it's a nightmare. Every time my breasts sway or my hips swivel, I get angry. Every time I put on makeup, I feel like I'm in drag. I should have been able to say all of those things, but for some reason, those statements didn't seem accurate. All I could say was, "Maybe it isn't terrible, but I think I would rather be male."

I think? I THINK? Where was the firm conviction that I was male through and through? Had that dissipated so quickly? No, not really. It was just that every hour I spent as Holly Sheridan made it seem just that much more natural. Yes, I would rather have been a male, but it was almost like my old male self saying 'yes, I would like to be taller.'

"Well, as soon as this mission is over, I'll talk to the Judge about that and see what he can do," Eric promised.

"I would appreciate that," I mumbled.

“In the meantime, I’m going to be gone for a long weekend,” Eric continued. “Keep working on the case. The Navy will be sending someone here on Monday to evaluate the project. That means the final designs will be ready Monday. We will be at our most vulnerable point then, so anything you can give me when I get back Monday may help us find the culprit.”

“I’ll do my best,” I promised. “But I thought the final design wouldn’t be ready until Thursday.”

Eric smiled. “That’s the official story, but Darren will have everything wrapped up today. Even the rest of the team doesn’t know it. So stay alert.”

“I will.”

And I would. I went immediately to Tricia’s office and pulled the files on the team members again. Back at my desk, I immediately opened Darren’s file. I found myself a little uptight about it. I liked Darren and I hoped there was nothing suspicious in his file. Unfortunately, I was disappointed.

Darren did make pretty decent money. His file indicated that he made in the low thirties. The problem was that low thirties was probably not to support expensive clothing, a nice house with a pool and a Corvette. Of course, it was possible that he had family money. Just because his life had been constructed by the gods didn’t mean he couldn’t have a rich uncle somewhere in the family who paid the bills either directly or posthumously.

Maybe there was something incriminating in one of the other folders that I had missed, I thought. Randy’s and Jeff’s files showed nothing, though. Besides, they were shades. I had come to realize that shades acted just like real people, but I couldn’t see one of them being a spy. Damon was still a possibility. I really didn’t know that much about him, but somehow, he didn’t seem the type. My brief conversation with him and the comments of others led me to believe he was a dedicated family man with a working wife. They lived well but not beyond their means. He just didn’t seem the type.

Meg was still a possibility. She had experienced a sex change after all. Maybe she wasn't as happy being female as she let on. But most spies wouldn't be in a developing relationship if they knew they might have to flee suddenly. The best spies were loners—people with no spouse or significant other who lived alone. People like Darren.

But wait a minute, I thought. There was nothing that said the spy had to be on the team. Technically, the spy could be anyone at Vulman. After all, it wasn't a secure facility. Most of the place built parts for Fords. That didn't rate very high security. Even if you narrowed the search down to people who worked in the office, that meant there were maybe thirty more suspects. The weird way things worked in Ovid, the spy could even have been the shade Holly, if you accepted the premise that a shade could be the culprit. Maybe I was chasing myself and didn't even know it. Between my investigation and too much beer the night before, I was getting a headache.

I felt better by lunchtime as I made my way to Darren's office. I was looking forward to getting to know him better. He was rapidly becoming my number one suspect, but in spite of the circumstantial evidence, I didn't really think in my heart that he was the one.

"Come on in," he called when he saw me at his door. His office was fairly plain. The only pictures on the wall were of new Fords, probably given to him by one of the Ford reps who visited the plant periodically. His desk was relatively neat, and there were two brown paper sacks on it.

"Lunch," he explained, nodding at the sacks. "I thought we could eat here after our workout."

I raised an eyebrow. "Workout?"

"Well, not really a workout," he admitted. Then he pointed to an open area of the floor where he had rolled out a padded mat. "I did think we could practice for a minute or two."

"That's right," I said. "You were going to show me how to defend myself."

“Well,” he admitted sheepishly, “I suspect you already know how to do that. If I indicated that you couldn’t, it was probably just the beer talking.”

“No,” I told him. “I didn’t do very well last night, and you did. Any pointers you can give me would be appreciated.”

He nodded. “Okay. As I told you last night, you’re a little small to be trying to throw a full-sized man. There’s an easier technique. Here, put a bear hug on me like Jake did to you last night.”

“Sure,” I said, coming up behind him. I threw my arms around him, feeling my breasts squeeze against his back. I was not surprised as I wrapped my arms around his waist to find that he was very fit. His stomach was flat and hard.

“Now watch this,” he said, dropping to one knee, grabbing my right leg, and pulling me off my feet. As I landed on my butt, I was happy for the first time that I had picked up a layer of feminine padding there. Otherwise, even the mat wouldn’t have cushioned my fall as well.

“Pretty good,” I admitted as he gave me a hand up.

“It works better for a woman,” he explained. “It’s like the old adage that goes the bigger they are, the harder they fall. It doesn’t take much strength, and you don’t need to worry about how to plant your feet while wearing heels. Now you try it.”

He came up behind me, grabbing me just below my breasts. I dropped as best I could, feeling my breasts pulled upward awkwardly and a little painfully. But he was right. My heeled boots were no obstacle since I already had a knee on the ground. I pulled his right leg as he had pulled mine and was rewarded with a satisfying thump as he hit the mat.

“Pretty good,” he allowed. “Now the same move works from the front, too. Here, let me show you.”

He put his arms around me tightly pulling me to him as if to steal a kiss. His lips moved closer and closer to mine...

“Drop!”

“What?”

“Drop down and grab my leg.” His lips were practically on mine. Then, before I could react, he was kissing me. I thought to drop and grab his leg, but there was something deep inside me that wanted this to happen. I felt my arms involuntarily drape around his neck. I felt our bodies move closer together. There was a new sensation between my legs, almost as if someone had spilled something warm there. I knew what it was, and the feeling was very pleasant.

Suddenly, we looked at each other, each as surprised as the other. We hadn’t meant for it to happen. I certainly hadn’t planned on it, but there it was. What the hell was happening to me anyway? It shouldn’t have felt right, but it did.

“Uh... I guess you get the idea,” he finally said.

“I think so,” I replied with a faint smile. I let my hands drop away and felt him release my waist. Neither of us could think of anything to say.

Nervously, he handed me a brown sack. “I got us both chicken salad sandwiches,” he said, trying to make it sound as if nothing had just happened. “I hope that’s all right.”

“Sure,” I answered, accepting the sack.

We ate together in silence. I was aware of what he was thinking. After all, I had been male myself for almost all of my life. He was thinking that I was between boyfriends, so maybe I might fall for him. He wanted that to happen, I could tell. I wondered if I had been so transparent as a man. Probably, I realized.

What was odd was that I was beginning to feel an attraction to Darren. Now, I had never been attracted to a man in my life. If I were still a man, I could have easily become friends with Darren. He was strong, self-assured, and forthright. He was just the sort of person I had always valued as a friend. But now that I had a full load of female hormones racing through my system, I had been forced to see Darren as potentially more than a friend. Added to his list of positive attributes, the female brain I now had was forced to add the

descriptors attractive, protective, and a good dancer.

I supposed I had to think of what might happen if I had to stay as Holly in Ovid. Eventually, I would have to consider sexual relations with a man. The thought was not a happy one, but there it was. It would eventually come down to go to bed with a man, be a lesbian, or buy a dildo. None of the prospects sounded very good to me.

We mumbled lukewarm “see you later” to each other and I went back to my desk.

I really didn’t accomplish much that afternoon. I noticed that very little work got done on Friday afternoons, either in the Navy or at Vulman Industries. At last four thirty rolled around and Andrea showed up at my desk to collect me.

“I’m looking forward to a hot bath,” I told her, explaining the bumps and bruises I had probably gotten from my little self-defense session with Darren.

“Well, it will have to wait,” she told me. “We’re meeting the production staff for a beer at Randy Andy’s.”

I groaned, “Not again. I can still feel the beer from last night.”

“Then consider this a little hair of the dog,” Andrea laughed. “We won’t stay long. Deuce has to work until closing, so I won’t be going over to his place until late. We can go home after a quick one and watch a movie or something.”

“Great.” I was looking forward to relaxing without playing Holly for a while.

Randy Andy’s was already jumping. I recognized a lot of people from Vulman Industries in the crowd. Andrea and I sat with the production staff. I had met some of them, so they weren’t all strangers.

Unfortunately, one of the staffers, a Ralph Cosgrove, sat next to me and made sure he was crowded right up against me. He was real but seemed to know only his current life. He kept trying to strike up a conversation with me, finally draping his arm nonchalantly over the back of my chair. It was too much for me to take.

Then I spotted Darren. He was drinking at a nearby table with his team. It gave me the perfect excuse to escape Ralph. "I'll be right back," I promised Ralph, having no intention of returning.

"Hi," Darren said as I sat down next to him. His team all greeted me as well. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm a little sore," I admitted. "Thanks for the lesson."

He smiled. "My pleasure. I'm sure Dennis will never bother you again, but it never hurts to be sure."

"Who?" I asked blankly.

"Dennis," he repeated. "Dennis Jessup. Remember? He was the guy who accosted you in the parking lot. Fortunately, it was pretty innocent, but I'm glad you agreed to the self-defense lesson just the same."

"No," I protested. "I was attacked by Jed and Ted Borland."

He shook his head. "I think you're a little confused, Holly. The only Borlands I know of are Jean and Tina Borland over there at the bar."

I looked at where he was nodding. Two girls, identical twins, were at the bar, flirting with two men who appeared to be truck drivers. Both girls wore identical tight pink dresses. Neither girl was particularly attractive, but the truckers didn't seem to care. I could imagine why. If I looked very closely at the girls, I could see they bore a faint resemblance to the men who had assaulted me the night before. Of course, I thought. Officer Mercer had hauled them away. The Judge had probably seen them this morning and changed them. Apparently not everyone remembered who they had been before. I suspected that only those of us who still had our original memories would know.

"I guess you're right," I conceded.

He paused for a moment, then said, "Look, Holly, I was wondering—would you have dinner with me tomorrow night?"

That was sudden, I thought. My god, I was being asked out on a date. Well, why not? It would give me a chance to learn more about the man

who was rapidly becoming my best suspect. "Sure."

He grinned. "That's terrific. There's a dinner dance out at the country club tomorrow night. I'll pick you up at seven if that's all right."

"Seven's fine," I replied. Wait a minute. Had I just done what I thought I had done? I agreed to go out on a date as a woman. To make it worse, a dinner dance. What in hell was happening to me? Oh, I knew I could justify the whole thing by saying that I just wanted to learn more about a suspect, but deep down, I knew that just didn't wash. After all, I wasn't trying to date any of the other guys or go shopping with Meg. No, I was zeroing in on Darren, and not because I thought he was a spy. Or at least, I hoped he wasn't a spy.

"Holly! Time to go!" Andrea was practically yelling from the bar to get my attention.

"Okay, Darren, I'll see you tomorrow," I said quickly.

"If you need a ride, I can take you home," he offered.

"No, thanks," I told him, squeezing his hand. "I agreed to hang out with Andrea tonight." Part of me wanted to stay with Darren, but I knew I was getting terribly close to doing something in this body I would regret if I ever got a male body again.

I didn't tell Andrea about the date until we got home and we were getting ready to watch a movie.

"A date with Darren? And a dance no less?" she practically squealed. "That's great! He is really a neat-looking guy. If I weren't going with Deuce, I think I'd be after Darren myself."

"Look, it's nothing like that," I protested. "We're just friends. I imagine he just needed somebody at the last minute to go with him and I was available."

"He didn't plan to go at all," Andrea said. "I overheard him tell somebody at the office just a couple of days ago that he hated dinner dances and wasn't going. I think what changed his mind is finding out you were available."

“You’re writing too much into this.”

She jumped on the couch next to me and put her arm around me.

“Hey, Deuce has to go to work about noon tomorrow. Why don’t I take you to get your hair and makeup done?”

“Now wait a minute,” I practically shouted, “I’m not going to... I mean I shouldn’t...”

“Oh, come on,” she insisted. “You’re wearing makeup now, and nail polish, too. I just want to see you really dolled up. You’re such a knockout now, I’ll be you’ll put some of the older guys into cardiac arrest when they see you really done up.”

“I’ll think about it,” I promised, hoping she would forget about it after a night with Deuce.

No such luck, though. I slept in on Saturday, and I was sitting in my pajamas just going through my second cup of coffee when Andrea barged in. “Come on, you need to get dressed,” she said. “I’ve got you an appointment with Janice over at M’lady in half an hour.”

Oh god, I thought, she remembered. “Look, Andrea, I’m not really a girl, you know.”

“Well you could have fooled me,” she laughed. “I don’t think Darren dates anything but girls, so either he’s made a terrible mistake or you’re a girl.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Come on,” she insisted, pulling me out of my chair. “You made the date all by yourself. I’m just here to make sure you do it right.”

I threw on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, did something quick with my hair, and presented myself to Andrea who promptly turned up her nose. “Going for the homeless waif look?” she asked me.

“You said to hurry,” I reminded her. “This is the best I could do on short notice.”

“Then it will have to do,” Andrea sighed. “Maybe Janice will want to take before and after pictures.”

M'lady was a small beauty shop just off Main Street. To my knowledge, I had never actually been in a beauty shop in my entire life. I felt as if I was a helpless lamb being led to the slaughter. What was wrong with my appearance? I mean, I needed a little work, but why all this fuss? I was just going out for dinner with a friend. So what if he was a guy and I was a... a... girl?

The first thing I noticed as we walked in was the chemical smell. It was absolutely overpowering. I didn't want anything that smelled like that anywhere near me. I balked at the door.

"Quit being such a baby," Andrea whispered.

An attractive brunette shade came to the front of the shop to greet us. She gave Andrea a hug and took my hands with a smile as her way of greeting. "You're really lucky," she told me. "I had a last minute cancellation or I could never have fitted you in today. What did you have in mind?"

I didn't have the slightest idea, but Andrea bailed me out. "Keep it long and full. Just trim it a bit and give it a little more wave. She has a big date tonight."

"Don't worry," Janice said to both of us. "I know just what to do."

She did, too. I never realized how heavy hair could be until she washed it. Once it was saturated with water, I had no trouble leaning over the sink for a rinse. What I thought I would have trouble doing was ever raising my head again. "Maybe you should just cut this short," I suggested.

"This beautiful hair?" Janice said, shocked. "That would be a crime. Wait until you see what I do with it. Then you tell me if you want me to cut it short."

I found out that hairdressers are a little bit like Marine Gunny Sergeants. They do things for your own good even if it kills you. I was used to going to the Navy barber on the ship and having him spend ten minutes trimming my hair down until scalp showed. No such luck as a woman, though. It took her the better part of an hour to wash,

trim, curl and shape the mass of black hair I had been given.

“What do you think?” I looked in the mirror with trepidation. Whatever had taken that long must look pretty far out, I thought. I almost gasped when I saw the result, though. My hair looked like a woman’s hair in one of those TV commercials where the model’s hair looks so lustrous you can actually see the sheen. My hair had only a slight, almost natural curl, with long waves of hair flowing gently down my back.

“Wow!” was all I could say.

Janice smiled. “I’m glad you like it. Now, it’s time to turn you over to Bobby Sue.”

“Who’s Bobby Sue?” I asked both Janice and Andrea.

“I’m the manicurist,” a pleasant alto voice said from across the room. Bobby Sue was an attractive blonde with long hair, large breasts, and fairly heavy but attractive makeup. Unlike Janice, she was real. “I hear you have a big date tonight.”

“That’s what everyone tells me,” I replied.

She laughed, “Then it must be true. Come over to my little corner of the world.”

I followed her into a little cubicle while Janice and Andrea remained behind, engrossed in their own conversation.

“You’re new at this, aren’t you?” Bobby Sue asked me when we were alone.

“Yes,” I sighed. “New at everything, I’m afraid.”

“Don’t worry,” she told me. “It gets easier after a week or so. I’ve been here a month and it seems as if I’ve been Bobby Sue all my life.”

“But you were a girl before,” I pointed out. “I mean, you must have been. How else could you be doing this for a living?”

“Wrong!” she laughed. “I was as male as you must have been.”

I was really shocked. “But how did you learn this job so quickly?”

“It’s what I did before,” she told me. “Don’t look so surprised. There

are male manicurists and cosmetologists and hairdressers.”

“Yeah,” I replied as she daubed nail polish remover on my fingernails, “but they’re usually...”

“Gay?”

I blushed. “Well, yes.”

“Not as many of them are gay as you might think,” she admonished me. “I was, though, if that makes you feel any better.”

“So you must have been happy with your change,” I ventured.

She gave me a patronizing smile as she began to use a file to shape my nails. “I said I was gay—not a transsexual. I enjoyed being male. I suppose my sexual orientation made it a little easier to accept making love to a man, but I missed my penis just as much as you probably miss yours.”

Ovid was indeed a strange place, I thought to myself. Yet somehow, it seemed to work. Men were changed into women and, presumably, women were changed into men, yet everyone seemed to be pretty comfortable with the situation. Even I was falling under the spell of the town, yet I didn’t seem to care. I still would have gladly changed back into a man in a heartbeat, but I was no longer completely uncomfortable being a woman. If I was forced to remain Holly Sheridan for the rest of my life, I felt as if I could stand it. The only thing I would miss to the point of distraction was flying.

Bobby Sue did as fine a job as Janice had done. When she was finished, she had given my finger and toenails a coat of deep red enamel that made them look absolutely elegant. Then, she worked on my makeup, and when I looked in the mirror at the results, I saw that Bobby Sue had turned me into an exotic beauty. I looked just a little Oriental, with long luxurious lashes and deeply shadowed eyes. My lips matched my nail polish perfectly. I smiled at the image in the mirror, well aware that only a couple of days before, I would have cringed at this standard of feminine beauty.

“Was I right?” Andrea asked as we drove home.

“You were right,” I sighed. “Is it time for me to say I don’t have a thing to wear now, or have you got that base covered, too?”

“Oh, your closet is full of nice little numbers,” she told me. “I’ll help you pick the right one.”

When seven o’clock rolled around, my only fear was that Darren might jump me the minute he walked in the door. I was wearing a dark red cocktail dress, matching three-inch heels, stockings that slightly darkened my already dark legs, and gold jewelry set with tiny rubies. I couldn’t remember the last time I had seen such a picture of loveliness, and it made me weak in the knees to realize that picture was me.

Darren was dumbstruck when he saw me.

“Well, what do you think?” I asked, a little nervous.

“I think it’s a crime I didn’t ask you out sooner,” he replied. We looked good together. He was wearing a charcoal suit and a red tie very similar in shade to my dress. We looked like a couple who had just stepped out of the pages of a magazine. All that we needed now was to be laughing out the door on our way to a sports car. Come to think of it, we were laughing as we left to get into Darren’s Corvette.

The Ovid Country Club was a typical small town country club. It was situated just a short distance off the highway surrounded by a clump of woods that separated the main building from the golf course. By small town standards, it was nice, reminding me of an Officer’s Club on a small naval base. By big city standards, though, it would hardly have rated as the tennis pavilion. There was no valet parking, so we parked the car and walked to the main building. I lived in mortal fear of tripping in the uneven parking lot. I still wasn’t entirely used to high heels.

Darren had been a complete gentleman. He had opened the car door for me, and when I got out, he gently put his arm around me to help me. His arm was still around me as we walked in. I found for some inexplicable reason that I liked having his arm around me. It made me feel not just safe, but as if I belonged. I was becoming used to this

new body—to this new sex—of mine. It had to be part of the magic, though. There was no way a person like me could have accepted all of this without a little magical help, I realized. Surely hormones alone weren't enough to change me this much?

The room was set up with mostly four-person tables, and we found ourselves seated with another couple who were already there. They were the Jagers, Steven and Susan, and I found them to be an interesting couple. He was a college professor and she was an attorney. They were both very attractive people, a little older than we were. We talked over glasses of wine, or at least, Darren and I drank wine. Both Steven and Susan limited themselves to club soda. After we had ordered, Susan asked me to accompany her to the restroom. I was finally going to find out if women really did plot the overthrow of men from the secret confines of the ladies' room.

Susan was squinting in the mirror. "Do my eyes look red?" she asked. I looked at them closely. She had beautiful blue eyes and her makeup was impeccable. "No, they look fine."

"I'm relieved," she said. "I finally got tired of glasses and decided to give contacts a try. They feel a little odd though. I hope I can wear them okay."

"How long have you worn glasses?" I asked as I touched up my lipstick in the mirror.

Susan looked around, making sure there was no one else in the room. "Ever since I came to Ovid," she replied, looking at me carefully.

"Then you were transformed?" I asked, picking up on her cue.

"Yes," she confirmed. "I used to be a lawyer in Dallas. A male one, that is."

"What is it with the Judge turning men into women?" I blurted. "I guess that you knew I used to be a man."

She smiled. "I suspected it. You're doing a great job, but those of us who have gone through it know what you're going through."

“I understand it gets easier with time?” I ventured.

She nodded. “It does. At first, you can’t believe what has happened to you. Then, you figure you’re going to have to learn to live with it, but you don’t have to like it. Then, acceptance sets in. You start to realize that a substantial percentage of the world’s population lives as female and likes it. Then finally, you start to understand why.” She said the last sentence with something resembling a contented sigh. Then she asked, “What do you think of Darren?”

“I like him,” I replied simply.

“Enough to spend the rest of your life with him?”

I hadn’t considered that as a possibility. At first, he was a suspect. Then, he became a friend. Now... I wasn’t sure. “Why do you ask?”

She smiled again. “Answering a question with a question. Maybe you should be a lawyer. You don’t really have to answer the question to me, but answer it to yourself. Ovid seems to weave a spell of its own, and romance seems to happen quickly. I saw the way he looked at you. He’s in love.”

“Love?”

“Yes,” she confirmed, “and I think it may be reciprocated.”

Was it? I wondered as we went back to the table. I had never been in love before, so I wasn’t sure what it felt like, especially with this brand of plumbing. As a man, I had dated many girls and went to bed with a great number of them, but I never loved them. They were just... well, just girls. Some of the girls told me they loved me, but all I could do was try to let them down gently. Now, the high-heeled shoe was on the other shapely foot. I was the girl, and it was a man who was falling in love with me.

We enjoyed a nice meal. I was happy to have Steven and Susan there, for it kept the conversation from becoming intimate. But on the dance floor, Darren held me closely. I could feel his rising manhood and found it stimulating my own body. Sometimes, we talked as we danced, about inconsequential things. But most of the time, he just

held me closely, smelling the soft scents of my hair and my perfume.

As we left, I was a little tipsy. I had to remember that this body had far less tolerance for alcohol than my old one did. Darren again held me closely—more closely than was actually necessary. Still, I was glad for his help.

“Would you like a nightcap?” he asked.

“I’d love one,” I replied. I had had quite a bit to drink, but one more would probably give me the courage to do what I planned to do—what we planned to do. Looking back on that evening, I have no illusions about my intent. My body was firmly and completely female, complete with all the right parts and all the right programming. I had gotten to know new women like Meg and Susan, and I realized that as strange as it would have sounded to me a few days earlier, they were happy being female and I could be, too. After all, I was a pilot, and pilots are nothing if not adaptable.

Back to my intent. I fully expected to get laid. No, wait a minute, that’s not quite right. As a man, I would have expected to get laid. Richard Baxter wanted to get laid. Holly Sheridan wanted to make love. Was I nervous? Of course I was. The idea of someone sticking into me what I had once so happily stuck into others practically made me shudder in fear. But there was a feeling buried inside my body that yearned for the sexual touch of a man.

The inside of Darren’s house was as nice as the outside. Very tasteful furniture, not overly masculine, graced the living room, which was highlighted by a large stone fireplace. Darren made a fire and then got us two snifters of brandy. Together on a large leather couch, I took a sip. To my new body, the brandy tasted strong, but I knew it was an excellent—and probably expensive—brandy. A quick thought about Darren’s lifestyle crossed my mind, then quickly flew. Darren couldn’t be the spy. He just couldn’t. I cared too much for him.

We didn’t speak. We didn’t need to. Just a couple of sips of the brandy and we were in each other’s arms. I vacillated between fear and pleasure as he lifted me in his strong arms and carried me into his

bedroom, his blue eyes never leaving mine. I felt myself being gently laid on the bed. Languidly, I kicked off my shoes while I loosened his tie. In minutes, we had managed to remove each other's clothing.

For a moment, I remembered that I had once had a body like his, trim and muscular. Now, I was soft and round. It caused my body to give way to his. We kissed long and hard, using our hands to explore each other's bodies. I was amazed to learn that there were so many parts of my new body that shivered at a lover's touch. It was like having dozens of places to be sexually stimulated. I knew there weren't dozens, but the shivers of pleasure I experienced seemed to radiate in all directions.

Penetration was not as bad as I had feared. Rather, it was like satisfying a hungry void. I guess that's really what it is for a woman, I realized with a groan of pleasure. But the best was yet to come. Darren was a slow and a considerate lover. I thought with chagrin that I had never been that way. Darren seemed more interested in my satisfaction than his. The result was an explosive orgasm accentuated by one of his own.

It was then that he said his first words to me since we had begun. "I love you," he said softly.

I didn't answer him. At least, I didn't answer him right away. After our second episode of making love, I told him I loved him, or I think I did. I was still in the middle of another orgasm when I said it.

We were still there, holding each other, at dawn. His rough, hairy skin felt so good against mine that I never wanted to leave. I snuggled closer to him, realizing he had a morning erection. My own sex became moist almost at once. Well, no use in letting it go to waste, I thought, rolling him gently on his back and climbing on board.

We slept for a couple more hours after that. It was nearly ten when I stirred again. Darren was still asleep, snoring softly. I slid out from under his arm and got out of bed. As I slipped into the shower, I was actually pretty proud of myself. I had made the ultimate adaptation to my new form. I might never have the opportunity to be male again, but

it didn't matter as much to me now. I had found that I could be comfortable having sex as a woman.

Of course, there were a few other things to get used to. I hadn't had a period yet, and I wasn't looking forward to having one. Of course, I didn't want the alternative either. Pregnancy had no appeal. I was thankful I had taken Andrea's advice and continued taking the birth control pills my shade self had taken.

Then, there was the Indian side of me. I was only half-Indian, but I couldn't deny my ethnic heritage. Come to think of it, I did look a little like the Disney version of Pocahontas. What did Indians do that was different from what other people did? I didn't have a clue. I suspected it wouldn't be much different from being completely white. Indians and part Indians like me made up a substantial part of Oklahoma's population. We were just folks.

As I stepped out of the shower, though, I remembered reluctantly that I still had a mission to perform. I had screwed up there. I had actually slept with a suspect. Not that I really thought of him as a suspect anymore. He was just Darren. A friend. A lover.

Darren was still sleeping when I got out of the shower. That man could sleep through anything, I thought with a smile. I picked up all of my clothes from the night before and got dressed. I looked a bit dishevelled, but Darren would be the only one who would see me. Well, Andrea would unless she had stayed with Deuce for the night, but I didn't care.

Once dressed, I made my way into the kitchen and put some coffee on. I thought about making breakfast, but I had no indication that I had inherited any cooking skills with my new body. I certainly didn't have any as Richard Baxter. Still, it might be fun to try. There were some cookbooks on a shelf. I decided to pull one out and see what I could make.

As I pulled it out, two file folders nestled between two books fell to the floor, their contents scattering over the tile. I began to pick up the papers. The first file was the design for the chip. It was dated the

preceding Friday. I made a mental note to tell Darren not to take a secret file home with him. Civilians never understood the need for tight security.

Then, in the second file, I saw something that made my heart stop. It was a picture of me. No, not the me I had become, but the old me. It was a picture of Richard Baxter. With trembling hands, I examined the rest of the file. It was fairly thin, but all the important facts of my life were there. What was Darren doing with that file? He supposedly had no knowledge of what was going on in Ovid, but it was obvious that he did know. So he wasn't one of the transformed who did not remember his previous life.

My stomach turned over violently. Talk about sleeping with the enemy. I cursed myself. I had been so enraptured with Darren that I had forgotten that he was one of my best suspects. Besides, I thought looking around, how else could he afford all of this? There was the house, nicely furnished, the Corvette, the pool, the country club membership, the expensive clothes. Oh my god. Darren was the spy. He had to be. He had been lying to me all along. Then why had he courted me? I guessed it was like the old adage goes: keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

I had to get help. Eric was still out of town. Who could help me? The Judge? Maybe, but I didn't really trust him. How about the police? No, the only police officer I had seen was Officer Mercer, and he was the Judge's man. Who did I really trust? Only one person, I supposed, and that was Andrea. I dropped the folder without thinking and headed for the front door. I realized I shouldn't have left the folder there, but I was a block away before I thought about it and feared going back.

High heels are not made for walking. I discovered that very quickly. Although Darren lived only three blocks from my apartment, I wasn't sure I'd be able to make it all the way in heels. I took them off and walked in my stockings. The pavement was warm but rough on my new feet. Some Indian I was, I thought. I wouldn't do well in moccasins.

I kept looking back over my shoulder, expecting at any minute to see

Darren's Corvette approaching, but my luck held. Thank god he was a sound sleeper. I had a giddy moment of him explaining to his foreign masters how he couldn't prevent exposure because he had overslept. And to think I had spent the entire night making love to him! The bastard! I hated him. Then why were there tears in my eyes?

Andrea let me in, since I suddenly realized that in haste, I had forgotten my purse. I just wasn't used to carrying the thing. "What happened to you?" she asked with concern, putting her arm around me to keep me from collapsing.

"Oh, Andrea," I bawled, "I've been an idiot!"

"Here, sit down and tell me about it," she urged, pulling me over to the couch.

Before I could begin, Deuce walked out of Andrea's bedroom. "Holly, have you met Deuce?"

"Not officially," I managed to say. So Deuce and Andrea had spent the night together. She was obviously happier about her choice than I had been about mine.

"So what happened?" Andrea asked.

"I spent the night with Darren," I told her.

"Then why are you crying?" she wanted to know. "Was he a brute?"

"Oh no!" I said gulping. "That part was... was fine, but I found out that he—awk!"

Suddenly, I couldn't speak. It was as if the words had all rushed into my mouth but couldn't get out. I was gagging.

Andrea realized at once what was wrong. "Deuce, go outside for a few minutes." He nodded silently and was gone. Then, Andrea told me, "Do you remember what I said about the rules in Ovid? You were trying to talk about Darren's transformation. Only two of us can talk about that at a time."

"But Darren wasn't transformed," I blurted.

Andrea frowned. "What do you mean? Of course he was transformed. All of us who are real in Ovid have been transformed except for..." Her eyes suddenly became wider. "Holly, this means Darren is one of them."

"Them?"

"Yes, them, like the Judge," she explained, "or maybe not quite like the Judge, but close like... like... Cache! Of course, I should have known."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, my bawling reduced to a snuffle.

She put her arm around my shoulder. "Now Holly, this is very important. How did you find out about Darren?"

Andrea was my roommate and my friend. In the few days that I had known her, I had come to trust her more than anyone else I had met in Ovid. I spilled my guts. I told her the whole story from beginning to end. I left out nothing. She listened in silence until I was finished. "You wait right here," she ordered. "I need to talk to Deuce. And don't answer the phone! It might be him."

As if on cue, the phone began to ring. I let it ring until I heard Darren's voice on the recorder. "Holly, this is Darren. Look, I saw the cookbooks, so I know you saw the file. There's a good explanation for it, though. I've got to talk to you about it. If you're there, pick up the phone. If not, it's nearly noon and I'll be over in half an hour."

That didn't give me much time. I did as Andrea told me, using the opportunity to change out of my dress and into a pair of jeans and a sweater. I had never been so rattled in my life, even the day I had nearly slammed into the fantail of a carrier. Of course, I hadn't been loaded to the brim with female hormones when that happened. Maybe there was something to the belief that women were, on the whole, more emotional than men. If so, then there was no doubt about it—I was all woman now.

Andrea burst into the room. "Deuce thinks he may come looking for

you.”

“He’s already called,” I said, slipping on a pair of loafers.

Andrea turned ash-white. “You talked to him?”

I shook my head. “No, but he left a message. He said he’d be here in half an hour. That was ten minutes ago.”

“Then we don’t have any time to waste,” she decided. “Let me check something with Deuce. You go on out to my car and wait.”

“All right,” I agreed, but as I hurried to her car, I began to wonder what was going on. Andrea and Deuce seemed as upset as I was. Why? Was there something else going on in Ovid that I knew nothing about?

Suddenly, I saw a Jeep Wagoneer fire up and go screaming out of the parking lot. Deuce was behind the wheel. Andrea came running into the parking lot. “Come on!” she yelled, opening the car door. “We’ve got to get out of here now!”

I jumped in the car, but I was beginning to feel very uncomfortable with what I had done. Eric had told me to tell no one, yet I had just done so. Had I made a mistake? Something was telling me that I had. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“Someplace safe,” she said cryptically, screaming out of the parking lot almost as fast as Deuce.

Someplace safe turned out to be Randy Andy’s. “But they’re closed on Sunday,” I said, noting the empty parking lot.

“I have a key,” she explained, pulling up behind the building so her car would be hidden from the road. “It belongs to Deuce. Marty has him lock up some nights.”

“Something’s not right about this,” I muttered. “Andrea, what’s going on? I’m not getting out of the car until you explain yourself.”

“Yes you are,” she said softly. I turned and looked at her. She was holding a gun and it was pointed at me.

“Andrea?”

“Holly, look, I’m sorry about this,” she sighed. “You never asked to get involved in this, and if I can, I’ll make sure you get out of this unharmed. But if you don’t get out of the car right now, I will shoot you.”

There was enough resolve in her voice that I knew she would do it. Well, this made me an idiot twice in one day, I thought to myself. I had trusted Darren and been betrayed. Now, I had trusted Andrea and been betrayed. Ovid seemed like East Berlin during the Cold War with a little magic thrown in.

Andrea led me into a small office. “Sit in Marty’s chair,” she ordered, motioning to a ratty office chair behind an equally ratty desk. It seemed as if Marty was not much of a housekeeper.

It had all come together for me in the last couple of minutes. I had concentrated too hard on the team members, but the reason I couldn’t uncover a spy there is that the spy wasn’t on the team. There were no secretaries on the team, so clerical help would have been delivered from outside the team. I had even been told that Andrea was that help, but I had ignored it. Andrea was my spy. With Deuce’s help, she had managed to steal the chip design.

So where was Deuce? Of course. He was waiting for Darren to go to my apartment. Then he would go through Darren’s house. With any luck—all bad—he would find the latest design for the chip in Darren’s house. Damn them all! They didn’t know the first thing about security. What was I saying? I was the one who had tipped off the real spies. If I had kept my head and not gotten involved with Darren, none of this would have happened, I realized.

Andrea sat across the desk from me, her gun pointed in my general direction. There was nothing I could do except wait. She actually looked at me with sympathy on her face. “Holly, I’m sorry this had to happen. I know you think Deuce and I are bad people, but we’re really not. If you knew the whole story, you might even agree with what we’re doing. I wish I could tell it to you.”

“Why don’t you try?” I urged.

She thought about that for a moment, then said, “Well, there are a lot of parts which will have to be left out, but I’ll do my best.” She smiled wistfully. “Come to think of it, I can’t even tell you who I really am. The... Judge’s edicts prevent even me from saying. But since you know who he is, maybe I can explain. Let’s just say the Judge and I are related. When the Judge and his cronies founded Ovid, not everyone agreed with his motives.”

“Motives?” I asked. “You mean why Ovid was founded?”

She nodded. “Exactly. Discussion of that is the biggest taboo of all. Only the... inner circle know all the reasons, and I’m not one of them. You might say I’m on the other side. The Judge has made a lot of enemies in his life.”

I wasn’t surprised. Any being with godlike power who had lived for thousands of years had to have made a few enemies. I had read enough mythology to know that at one time or another, virtually every god and goddess had had his or her differences with the king of the gods. “I’m sure,” was all I said.

“This much I can tell you,” she went on. “Even though Ovid is a magical construct, it’s much easier to sustain it if it has a viable economy in the real world. Hence, Vulman Industries and a few other enterprises. This new chip and the related software would guarantee Vulman big profits which will help the entire Ovid Project. We couldn’t let that happen. We plan to share the research with other companies who have the resources to improve upon this. Vulman’s chip will be obsolete in a month.”

“And every enemy of the United States will have it, too,” I countered. “Not much of a trade-off if you ask me.”

“We’re doing this for the sake of humanity,” Andrea said with passion. “You could help us. You don’t owe these... beings anything. You could help us decipher the software since you’re a pilot and know about these things. Help us. You could hurt them badly by helping us.”

Yes, I could, I realized, if I really knew the software the way they had been led to believe I did. I still wasn't sure what Ovid was all about, but I trusted Eric and Darren more than I trusted Andrea and Deuce. The spies had been exposed, and they were preparing to leave town. There was no reason for me to pretend to be on their side.

"I'm sorry, Andrea, but I can't help you."

She closed her eyes. "I was afraid you'd feel that way."

There was a screech of tires, and moments later, Deuce rushed into the room. "I got it!" he said triumphantly.

"Any problems?" Andrea asked.

He shook his head. "It went just like we discussed. Darren took off like a bat out of hell for your place, and I just strolled in. The file was still on the kitchen floor where she dropped it."

Great, I thought. I had made it easy for them. Not only did I not stop them, but instead, I had actually helped them make off with the plans for the chip. I had unwittingly helped the enemies of my country and probably doomed myself to being Holly Sheridan or something worse forever. I wondered if the Judge had the power to turn me into a jackass. It was what I probably deserved.

"Then let's get out of here," Andrea said. "We don't have much time."

Deuce nodded at me. "What about her?"

Andrea handed him the gun. For a moment, I thought I was about to be killed, but Andrea told him, "Keep the gun on her for a minute while I get ready." She rummaged through her purse, finally extracting a hypodermic needle and a small bottle. She filled the hypo and turned to me. "Holly, this will just knock you out for a few hours. Since you won't be awake to identify us, it may give us a little more time to get away."

She plunged the hypo into my arm. At once I felt a numbness spreading up my arm. I was becoming light headed.

"I'm really sorry," Andrea said sadly. "I really do like you, Holly. I hope

someday you will understand. Good luck.”

She turned to go. I saw her reach the doorway when I finally passed out...

“... coming around,” a woman’s voice echoed through my head.

I opened my eyes. I was in an unfamiliar room. The lights were dim, so I couldn’t make out any details. I saw an attractive black woman in medical greens standing over me. She was holding my wrist.

“Can we talk to her?” a male voice echoed behind her. It sounded like... Darren?

She shook her head. “Not yet.”

Then I passed out again.

There was suddenly bright light in my face. My eyes opened as if an alarm had gone off. I looked around and saw that I was in a hospital room. It appeared to be morning. For a moment, my mind was so clouded that I forgot everything that had happened to me in Ovid. I looked in shock at my breasts and felt a momentary pang of loss for what was not between my legs. Then, as I shook my head feeling the waves of long black hair against my neck, I remembered.

A woman in medical greens rushed in. She wasn’t the same woman I had seen earlier. Instead, she was Indian... like me. “Doctor!” she called out the door of my room. “She’s awake!”

Another woman, this time a shade hurried into the room. She was tall and slim, about thirty-five with a nametag that identified her as Dr. Anderson. She checked my pulse and looked at the monitors beside my bed. “Well, Ms. Sheridan, I’d say you’ve made a complete recovery.”

“What... what happened?” I asked, my voice a little strained.

“You were given a very strong sedative,” she replied. “It was nothing

dangerous, but it managed to keep you out cold for quite a while. Now, it's Monday morning and you're fit enough to face the world. I'll get you released while Nurse Williams here helps you dress and tells your driver you'll be down shortly."

"My driver?"

She smiled. "Yes, Officer Mercer is waiting for you. By the way, he's the one who brought you in yesterday. You must be a very important patient. We were told to monitor you around the clock."

I was important all right. I was probably going to be dragged back into the courtroom and pay the price for my failure. It was a shame, I thought as I pulled myself out of bed. I was actually getting to like this body. It was light and healthy, and I found I was even starting to enjoy the stares I got from men... one man in particular. Could he ever forgive me for thinking he was the spy?

Then, I remembered the file on Richard Baxter. Could I ever forgive him for lying to me? He knew who I really was all the time. Yet he had treated me like... like a woman.

Nurse Williams pulled a tan business suit, tan pumps and a beige silk blouse out of the closet. The requisite underwear and accessories were there as well. I didn't ask where they came from, but I recognized them as being mine even though I had never worn the outfit before. I was a little unsteady, but with the nurse's help, I was able to get dressed.

As the nurse gave me my purse, I was able to give myself one last look in the mirror. I had applied makeup exactly as Andrea had taught me. Andrea. I would miss her, even if it turned out that she had completely wrecked my new life. I guessed that was the difference between fiction and real life. In fiction, the baddies can be absolutely bad, complete with evil sneers and nefarious manners. In real life, though, the baddies are seldom all bad, and conversely, the good guys aren't all good. Maybe that was my problem. I hadn't realized that fact until it was too late.

Officer Mercer was waiting for me in front of the hospital. He gave a

thin smile and said tonelessly, "Good morning, Miss Sheridan." He opened the car door for me more like a chauffeur than a policeman. At least I would be riding to my fate in style, I thought grimly.

He drove without any further conversation, but to my surprise, he drove right past City Hall and turned out onto the highway. At last I realized we were on our way to Vulman Industries. There, I realized I would be facing Eric Vulman and have to tell him of my failure. Darren would be at Vulman, too. I made a note to try to avoid him. I was too embarrassed to see him.

One of the benefits of Ovid being a small town is that I didn't have long to think about what came next. In a few minutes, we were at Vulman Industries. As the car stopped, I tried to open the door, only to find that the back doors of police cars don't open that easily. Officer Mercer came around and again did the honors. "They're expecting you in Mr. Vulman's office," he said.

Good old Mercury, messenger of the gods. Today, I was apparently the message. With a sigh, I accepted his help getting out of the car and walked in the front entrance. Was it really less than a week ago that I had begun my work as Holly Sheridan here at Vulman? I asked myself. It seemed longer somehow. I had actually met some people that I would always think warmly of. There was the chip team, particularly Meg who was so happy with her new life, and Tricia who may have been anyone before but was now my friend. Then there was Eric, who had treated me like a son—well, a daughter—and whose confidence I hadn't lived up to. Of course, there was Andrea—gone now, but in spite of it all, still a friend. And finally, there was Darren. What was Darren? A friend? A lover? Both, perhaps.

I knocked softly on Eric's door, and hear his clear baritone call, "Come in, Holly."

How had he known it was me? Oh, of course, he was a god.

I opened the heavy door, not knowing what to expect. There, standing around the table enjoying coffee were Eric, the Judge, Admiral Nepper, and Darren. Their faces brightened when they saw me, and

Eric set his cup down, came over to me and gave me a fatherly hug. "Thank god you're all right," he said happily.

Thank god? Why not thank the gods? Could it be that the powerful gods of Greek and Roman Mythology recognized a power above themselves? I smiled and muttered a weak, "Thank you."

"I think you know everyone here," he said brightly.

"Yes," I agreed, feeling somehow naked in the presence of three gods. What was Darren doing with them? Surely he wasn't... Or maybe he was.

"I seem to remember you drink this with cream now," Eric said, handing me a welcome cup of coffee. "Now that we're all here, let's get on with the meeting."

Confused, I took a seat at the foot of the conference table. Darren sat closest to me. He quickly patted my hand and gave me an encouraging look. I decided to remain silent until I heard what each of the others had to say. Eric began the meeting.

"Needless to say, we've had some real excitement here over the weekend."

The others chuckled softly. Now, I was really confused. I would have thought everyone would have been very grim. After all, secrets relating to the security of the United States had fallen into hostile hands.

"Now, for Holly's benefit, I would appreciate it, Admiral, if you explained what you're doing here today."

"Of course," the Admiral said. "Holly, I'm here to take the specifications for the chip and the related software back to Washington where a prototype fuel pump will be built and tested. My trip was scheduled a week ago before your mission began."

"But, sir," I interrupted, silently cursing myself for interrupting an admiral, "the development on the chip wasn't completed until Friday."

He smiled indulgently at me. "That chip won't work. Darren threw an

intentional bug into it that caused all the work that was done on it last week. Even his team didn't know about it, except for Randy, and now we've changed Randy's memories so he doesn't know about the switch either."

"Then my mission was never real," I concluded with disappointment. "You already knew who the spies were. Of course, you're g..."

"You can say it, Holly," the Judge said quickly. "While you are with us in this room, you have dispensation to refer to us as gods."

"And in rebuttal to your last comment, no, we did not know who the spies were," Eric told me. "As I told you before, we aren't omnipotent or omniscient. There are other powerful forces in the world who can use some of the same powers we use."

"We needed you to ferret out the spies and lead them in the wrong direction if possible. We never imagined it would turn out the way it did," Admiral Nepper explained.

"It's my fault, really," Darren explained. "I was to have the folder for the faulty chip in my home and hope that the word would get around that I was taking work home. I never intended for you to be placed in danger. We were hoping you would be able to identify the spies and I would do the rest."

"Then why did you have a folder on my real identity with it?" I asked.

He looked a little sheepish and said, "I'd rather explain that one to you privately."

"Holly," the Judge broke in, "have you ever heard of Prometheus?"

"I think so," I said slowly. "Wasn't he the god who gave fire to humans?"

"Yes," the Judge said a bit peevishly, "thus making himself a hero to humans while I am the villain of that story."

"But you did bind him to a rock and order one of your eagles to eat his liver, brother," Admiral Nepper pointed out.

"Yes," the Judge agreed defensively, "but I allowed his liver to be

constantly renewed, so no real harm was done, was it?"

"In any case," Eric broke in, "Prometheus had a son—Deucalion—and this son has reason to have a grudge against the Olympians, as we refer to ourselves. Along with his wife, Pyrrha, they managed to come to Ovid and disguise their true identities."

"Yes," the Judge added. "I never changed them, but the records indicated that I had done so."

"Deuce and Andrea Pyron," I concluded.

"That's right," Eric agreed, taking another sip of coffee. "By the way, Holly, you make much better coffee than I do. To continue, it appears that our two spies are working for enemies of the Olympians. Like father like son, Deuce appears to be trying to spread a new kind of fire to all mankind while we would keep this a military secret of the United States."

"And after all I did for them," the Judge muttered.

"My esteemed brother saved their lives during the Great Flood," Admiral Nepper explained.

'There really was a Great Flood?' I asked myself.

"So now, our two spies are off to their masters, whoever they may be, with plans for a device which will not work, completely unaware that we have one that does," Eric summed up.

"But who are they working for?" I wanted to know.

"A question we may never know the answer to, my dear," the Judge said. "Deuce's grandfather is Iapetus, one of the Titans who we overthrew centuries ago. It is possible there are still representatives of that ancient race who would restore themselves to power. Let us hope that it never happens, for in spite of what our two idealistic spies believe, the return of the Titans would not be beneficial to mankind."

Everyone except me nodded in solemn agreement.

"So now," the Judge continued, "there remains only what to do with you, Holly."

“With me?” ‘Oh-oh,’ I thought, here it comes.

“Yes. As you will recall, I continued the case against you,” the Judge explained. “That allows me to modify your sentence considerably.”

“We have the power to create a new existence for you—a male existence if you prefer,” Admiral Nepper added. “You’re a fine officer, and I would like to offer you a position on my staff.”

“So if there’s no further business here,” the judge began, “we can go back to the courtroom and...”

“Excuse me, sir,” Darren broke in, “could I have just a few minutes alone with Holly?”

The Judge looked at Darren, then at me. I was too startled to say anything. What did Darren want to discuss with me? “Of course.”

“May the dispensation continue?” Darren asked.

“Yes,” the Judge replied. “You know how to get to court when you’re ready.”

“I do.”

Without another word, Eric, Admiral Nepper, and the Judge winked out of existence. Darren and I were alone in the room.

“I wanted a few minutes to talk to you before you make your decision,” Darren said.

Yes, I had a decision to make. I had grown comfortable as Holly for the last few days, but in my heart, I was still a pilot and an officer. I knew what my answer would be.

“Holly,” he began, “the other night when I said I loved you...”

I put my hand on his. “You don’t have to explain. I understand, you were just saying it as part of the mission.”

He shook his head. “No, that’s not it at all. I really meant it.”

“You did?”

“Yes,” he said. “That’s why I had your folder. I wanted to learn

everything I could about you. Look, you need to know more about me—who I am and what my part in this is. I'm Eric's son. My real name isn't Cache—it's Cacus. According to Roman myth, I have three heads and breathe fire."

"Do you?" I asked, horrified.

He smiled and shook his head. "No, the Romans have a gift for exaggeration. Except for the Olympians like my father, our powers are pretty limited. That's why I had to ask for dispensation. I couldn't even explain this to you if the Judge didn't allow it."

That was also why I couldn't mention the names of the gods around Andrea, I suddenly realized. "But you live forever?"

"Yes and no," he replied enigmatically. "The Darren Cache you know will grow old normally and die, but there will be a new one with all of my memories when I'm gone. So for the me you see right now, this is it. This is the life I get, and I'd like to spend it with you."

My mouth dropped open in stunned silence. "What?"

"I love you, Holly," he explained. "I've always been fascinated with Holly Sheridan, but as a shade, she lacked true strength. You gave her depth and purpose."

"But I'm a man," I protested. "Or at least, I was a man." And can be again, I realized.

He took my hands in his and stared into my eyes. "Look, Holly, I know who you were. That's why I had your file. I wanted to know everything about you—the old you. There's more magic in Ovid than the obvious magic that changed your physical shape. The magic takes the best of the old you and merges it into a new package. I love you for what you were, what you are, and what I know you can be."

And what could I be? A girl? A wife? A mother? Yes, I realized, I could be those things, and I could probably be happy being them. But what was I giving up? The chance to be a pilot and an officer on an admiral's staff—that's what. But I wouldn't be Richard Baxter. He no longer existed. Who would I be?

More importantly, did I love Darren? The thought of loving a man still seemed odd to me, but when I remembered our lovemaking only a day ago, my body began to tingle. I had never known such pleasure in lovemaking as a man, and come to think of it, I had never felt as close to anyone as I had felt to Darren that night.

“Holly?”

“Huh? Yes?”

“Look, we can’t keep the Judge waiting very long,” he said apologetically. “He’s mellowed a lot through the centuries, but he is still the King of the Gods.”

But I hadn’t made up my mind! I would have to depend on my instincts.

“Let’s go,” I said.

To his credit, Darren did not ask me what I was going to do. He uttered a short phrase that sounded like Latin and Eric’s office disappeared, to be replaced suddenly by the courtroom where my journey as Holly Sheridan had begun.

“Court is now in session,” Officer Mercer’s voice intoned.

I looked around. I was standing before the bench by myself, but in addition to the blonde woman who had been in the courtroom for my first appearance, Eric and Darren sat side by side. Admiral Nepper was nowhere to be seen. Presumably he had returned to Washington.

“The case of the City of Ovid versus Richard Baxter is now back in session,” the Judge said. “Have you made your decision?”

Had I? I had joined the Navy for adventure. What greater adventure could there be than flying a jet fighter? I wondered. Then, I had another thought. If adventure was what I sought, what greater adventure could there be than being part of a scheme of the gods? And besides, wasn’t true love an adventure all to itself?

“I’m waiting for your decision,” the Judge prodded.

“Your Honor,” I began formally, “I would like to remain as I am now—as

Holly Sheridan.”

“You understand that there will be no going back on this decision,” he reminded me. “Once the court is adjourned, you will be Holly Sheridan for the rest of your life.”

I had an entire life to explore the unknown—how to be a wife and perhaps a mother. Then, there was my Indian heritage. I would have to explore that as well. But I would miss the flying...

“I understand, Your Honor.”

Did I see a small smile on the Judge’s face? “Then court is adjourned!” he said with a rap of his gavel.

Suddenly Darren was there, his arms around me. Before I could speak, his lips were on mine. My body seemed to melt in his arms, and I never wanted the kiss to end. I knew for certain in that moment that I had made the right decision.

“If you two could hold off just a little while, it is still a working day and we need to get back to the office,” Eric said lightly.

“Are we going back the same way we came?” I asked.

“No,” he laughed, “that is saved for official business. There’s only so much magic in the world, you know. Officer Mercer will be taking us back.”

Eric sat up front with Officer Mercer, while Darren and I held on to each other in the back seat. We had come so close to losing each other that it was as if we still feared it would happen if either of us let go.

“We have to attend a quick meeting on the Production Room floor,” Eric explained. “I called ahead, so everyone should be there.”

Everyone was waiting for us when we walked in. Eric hushed the crowd and announced, “As you know, Vulman Industries is expanding operations around the nation. This means a lot of new opportunities for our employees. Effective today, Darren Cache is no longer Director of Research and Development. He has been promoted to Executive

Vice President reporting directly to me. Darren will be shortly choosing his own Director of R&D.”

There was enthusiastic applause from everyone, but especially from me.

“Another announcement involves my Executive Assistant, Holly Sheridan.”

I looked at him in surprise.

“As some of you may know, Holly has worked hard over the last couple of years to get her pilot’s license. Given the far-flung nature of our operations, I have decided that we need a Corporate Pilot. Holly will be adding those duties to her job as my Executive Assistant.”

There was more applause as I flushed with pleasure. I was still going to be able to fly!

“And Holly,” Eric said with a twinkle in his eye, “when some of our new products come to the marketplace, you may have to fly something a little hotter than a Learjet for us.”

A few of the people who knew of the chip project laughed. I was grinning from ear to ear. My days of flying fighters weren’t quite over!

“Now, one last announcement if you two agree,” he went on, looking at Darren and me.

Darren looked expectantly at me. I smiled and nodded my head. We came together, arm in arm and nodded to Eric.

“Then I would like to announce an engagement...”

“Well, at least I learned a little more about you,” I told Diane when I had come out of my trance.

She shrugged. “It won’t be long before you have it all figured out.”

“But only the Olympians have all the story,” I surmised.

“Yes,” Diane agreed, “and we’re a secretive lot, aren’t we?”

“Would the Judge have really let Holly go back to being a male?”

Diane thought about that for a moment. “Yes, I think he would. She had earned it. Her life was in danger. She wouldn’t have been the first human caught in the crossfire in a war among the gods. That’s what’s really happening you know.”

I shivered, but not from being cold, and wrapped my arms around myself. “Are we in any danger here in Ovid?”

“I doubt it,” she replied, drinking the last of her lemonade. “If anything, you’re probably safer. The Judge will be more careful in the future. Now, I must pop off.”

She meant it, too, as she prepared to pop out of the room. “I thought that was for official purposes only,” I pointed out.

“Well,” she said with a wicked grin, “there’s official and official. Right now, there’s an official hunk waiting for me for a hot night on the Riviera, and it’s just about sundown there.”

Like the Cheshire cat, I could swear her grin lasted for a moment longer as she disappeared from my kitchen.

Ovid VI: The Developer

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It was a perfect Saturday morning in Ovid. The sun was shining with the promise of a warm—but not hot—spring day. The humidity was relatively low for late May, and there was a light breeze from the north which meant I could open up the house and smell the aromas of spring.

Jerry was at the store, but he promised me he'd be home by three. My parents were due in by five to take the kids out to the farm for the rest of the weekend. That left Jerry and me free to go out to Winston's for a nice meal and then home to try out the goodies I had bought in the lingerie department at March's the day before. I felt a pleasant tingle between my legs that brought a smile to my face. How could I ever imagined this time a year ago that I, Matt O'Hara—All-American Boy, would become Cindy Patton, the mother of two darling children and a loving wife who couldn't wait to drag her handsome husband into bed for a marathon night of sex.

I sighed happily, leaning back in a kitchen chair to take another sip of my favorite coffee.

"Mommmmm!"

I sighed again, this time not so happily. "What is it, Michelle?" I called.

Suddenly, my six-year-old daughter came rushing into the kitchen, followed by Belinda Daniels, one of her little friends from school. "Mike just said a naughty word!" Michelle announced.

I smiled in spite of myself. When Mike and Michelle had been two of my fraternity brothers along with Jerry, we had all used a number of naughty words. Well, Jerry and I still used a few, but not in front of the children. Of course, of my entire family, I was the only one who realized we had all been changed into the idyllic Patton family.

"Mike," I said sternly, not bothering to rise from the kitchen chair.

A small boy, the twin of my daughter, reluctantly appeared in the doorway. He looked so cute it was all I could do to keep from getting up and hugging him.

"Now, what did you say to your sister and her friend?"

He mumbled, "I called them dorks."

I frowned slightly. "Well, I wouldn't call that a particularly naughty word, but it still isn't very nice."

"But they're dorky girls," he replied, a little relieved that 'dork' was apparently a milder term than he had imagined.

"Girls, yes," I agreed, "but not dorks. Someday, my little lad, you'll be doing everything in your power to impress girls—not annoy them. They won't want to date you if you call them names."

"Date!" he repeated. "Yuck!"

I had to laugh. "Go on, you guys, time to play."

Mike and Michelle bolted for the den, each trying to be the first to take control of the TV, but Belinda stayed behind. "Can I have a drink of water?" she asked politely. Of all Michelle's friends, she always seemed to be the most polite and the most mature. She had been a shade until recently, and as childish as anyone else her age. Now, though, she was real and had had several weeks to get used to her new identity.

"Of course, dear," I replied, rising to get her a glass of water. When I handed it to her, she thanked me and took a sip. She looked as if she wanted to say something, so I asked, "Is there something you want to talk about, Belinda?"

She nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Uh, Mrs. Patton, do you remember who you... I mean, were you ever..."

I had heard others stumble over the question as Belinda was now.

"Are you trying to ask me if I remember who I used to be?"

Her face brightened in relief. "Yes! Oh, yes! You do remember. I thought you did." I thought for a moment, she would actually break into

tears, but she managed to hold them back.

I reached over and gave her a motherly hug. "So, of course, you remember who you were, too, don't you?"

She nodded her pretty head. "Uh-huh."

"Let me guess," I said softly. "You weren't a little girl before."

"No," she agreed slowly. "I don't like being a little girl either." At that, she did burst into tears.

"Belinda!" Michelle yelled from the den.

"She'll be out there in a minute, honey," I called to her, grabbing a napkin to wipe her liquid blue eyes.

"Th... thank you," she sniffed, practically cradled in my arm.

"Now," I said, sitting her down next to me when she had stopped, "why don't you tell me all about it?"

Of course, I knew all about it. I had been in the courtroom, doing my job as assistant to the Judge, who was, of course, the god Jupiter. I had watched as Belinda and her two friends, all male at the time, had swaggered into the courtroom, their black leather jackets emblazoned with the patch of the Screaming Eagles, a biker gang out of Houston. Within a few minutes, each of the tough, bewhiskered bikers had been changed into a little girl, the oldest of whom was only ten. The other two girls didn't remember who they had been, which was the more common situation in Ovid. Belinda remembered, though.

I knew it was hard for her—probably harder than for most. When I was changed, I had been a college student. Although I had been masculine enough, I wasn't a rough and tumble sort of guy. I had adapted quite well to being female—better than most, I was sure. The same was true for some of my friends, like Susan Jager, a promising young attorney in Ovid.

For transformees like Belinda, though, things were particularly tough. She had been Screech McCracken, a tough biker who had been notorious for his antics in small towns all over the southwest. The

Judge had taken special pleasure in changing Screech into a very pretty and very feminine little girl. Like everyone in Ovid, Belinda began to adapt slowly to her new role, but it had been very hard for her. A prison sentence would have probably been a milder punishment.

"I don't want to talk about it," she replied softly. "I just can't. I... Mrs. Patton, I need to know. Were you a boy before?"

"Well, that's a very personal question, sweetheart," I answered. I intentionally used the word 'sweetheart' to reaffirm her sex and status. I had no intention of making things too easy for her. Screech McCracken had been a nasty customer and was now getting what he so richly deserved. Still, I had found myself liking the little girl he had become. I would have to tread softly. I wanted to help her, but making things easy for her might not be the best help. I was starting to understand the difficult task the gods had given themselves. They strove to make our lives whole, but not necessarily easy.

"Okay," she said, accepting that I was not going to tell her about myself. "I understand, I think. It's hard to think straight anymore."

Yes, it was. One of the great difficulties in changing adults into small children was that they had lost the innocence of childhood. If they were to succeed in becoming whole, it was something they had to regain on their own. Belinda was slowly but surely returning to childhood. I knew that she had reluctantly agreed to play with Michelle that morning, but it was an important step for her in realizing who she had to become.

"You'll do fine," I assured her. "The hard part is really already over."

"The hard part?"

I smiled. "You learned how to cry."

She gave me a tiny hint of a smile. "Thank you, Mrs. Patton."

"Any time, Belinda," I said, returning her smile. "Now, go play with Michelle."

"Yes, ma'am."

It was almost a little girl who went scurrying off to the den.

I returned to my coffee, another crisis solved—partially at least. I had taken just one more sip of the now lukewarm brew when there was a “pop” in the den, followed by the screaming of three small children. In horror, I jumped to my feet. Then, the screams turned to laughter. “Xena!” I heard Michelle squeal.

An Amazon marched into my room, followed by three adoring children. She did, in fact, look something like Xena. She was tall—at least six feet—and had raven tresses flowing down her well-tanned back. She wore a leather tunic and high leather boots, both studded with gleaming silver. Of course, I knew at once who it was.

“A little early for Halloween, isn’t it, Diana?” I drawled.

“Are you Xena?” Mike asked with awe in his little voice.

Diana, as in the goddess Diana, smiled at him. “No, little guy, but I’m sort of like her. I am Di-an, Warrior Princess. Now, go play and let me talk to your mom.” She made a slight motion with her hand, and all three children wandered out of the room. I was sure she had made them already forget what they had just seen.

Facing me, she made another gesture, and suddenly, she was wearing shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals just like me. Well, better than me, actually. I was attractive, but Diana in any of her avatars was absolutely breathtaking. She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table with me. “Boy, it’s good to get out of my working clothes,” she said with a sigh.

“Have I just seen the real Diana?” I asked.

She frowned. “Oh, that stuff? No, those are just my working clothes. My brother, Apollo, is co-producing a movie. It’s some sword and sorcery epic being filmed in Mexico. Lots of T and A in it. It’s a little on the cheap and sexy side, so they’ll probably release it directly to cable. I took a role in it just to make him happy. I’m getting too old for this sort of work, though.”

This from a woman who never looked over thirty.

“Then why did you do it?” I asked, taking another sip of coffee.

“Well,” she explained, “it’s been a little dull around here lately. Since we had the spies at Vulman a few weeks ago, the Judge seems to be slowing down his case load.”

Actually, that was true. Spies had slipped in, and until the other gods figured out how it had happened, the recruiting of new Ovid residents had been slowed to a crawl. Most of the recent additions to the population had been new shades, working at Vulman Industries on the new military contract.

“I understand he did nail a big fish this month, though,” she said with a sly grin.

“That he did,” I agreed. “I suppose you want to see the whole thing.” That was part of my job, of course. Recorded deep in my memory were the details of every Ovid case. When a god or goddess wanted to review them, I had to make myself available. Most of the gods chose to forgo the presentation, but Diana was always looking for a good story.

“Whenever you’re ready,” she said with a smile.

I took one more sip of coffee and began to fall into a trance.

I was staring directly into the blue eyes of Martin R. Brubaker. The eyes were usually cold and empty, animated only when excited by the rush of success. Then, they took on a cruel gleam which meant the person he had been looking at had been beaten. They were eyes that had shown no emotion when his wife had killed herself, presumably because she had been beaten down by him over the years. Not physically beaten, of course. That would be too crude for the ‘God of Real Estate,’ as the *Wall Street Journal* had dubbed him. No, he had beaten her down mentally, his cold eyes mirroring the contempt he felt for her.

Now, though, those eyes showed something else. I had a difficult time identifying what those eyes were conveying that night, but at last I

knew. Martin R. Brubaker, the God of Real Estate, was frightened.

He had good reason to be frightened, I realized. He was a passenger in a private jet which was threatening to shake apart somewhere over Oklahoma as storm clouds swirled just outside with strong winds buffeting the plane violently. We were all frightened. We had good reason to be. There was a definite possibility that we would not survive our flight. As much as I wanted to live, though, I had to admit to myself that even dying might be worth it just to see the God of Real Estate crap in his pants.

It couldn't happen to a nicer guy, I thought sarcastically. I had worked for him for ten years, and in that ten years, I had learned to hate him more than I had ever thought possible. I had watched him treat everyone who had helped him to the top as if they were dirt under his feet. He had belittled and degraded enemies and allies alike, and he had treated me no differently. After all, I was only Martin R. Brubaker, Junior.

I looked around at Miss Simon. She was the only other passenger in the plane, and she was as frightened as the rest of us—I could see it in her deep blue eyes. She was my father's secretary. She was an attractive blonde, a few years younger than my twenty-eight years. She looked both professional and sexy in her tailored navy-blue suit with a short slit skirt. I had entertained a number of fantasies about her since my father had hired her only a few months before, but those fantasies were never to be realized. My father had strict rules about relations with the hired help, and Miss Simon was beneath me in status. Besides, my father had already picked out a wife for me.

Lucinda Watson was the only daughter of Malcolm Watson the Third, president and principal stockholder of one of the largest insurance companies in the country. His company had a real estate portfolio that was second to none. A merger of our two families through my marriage would mean my father would have an investment partner who would be able to finance many of his new projects. I sighed. At least marrying Lucinda would give me some useful function in the company. In spite of a Harvard MBA, I was reduced to a role not much

greater than Miss Simon. What was I saying? She could at least type a letter. That was probably beyond my authority.

I was the laughing stock of the company. I knew it, of course. Sure, I had the title of Vice President, but I wasn't vice president of anything. What I was, was an errand boy for my father. Ever see 'Fierce Creatures?' I was like Kevin Kline in that movie. I hoped I didn't act as stupid as he did, but I certainly was like him when it came to job authority.

"Miss Simon!" he barked over the roar of the jet engines. "I want you to go forward right now and find out what that lunatic in the cockpit thinks he's doing with my airplane."

Miss Simon looked frightened, and I couldn't blame her. The plane was being buffeted by heavy winds which made it rise and fall wildly without warning. Flashes of lightning were adding noticeably to the brightly lit cabin of the plane. Standing went beyond stupid. It was downright dangerous.

"Father, I'll do it," I offered, starting to unbuckle my seat belt. Damn that streak of chivalry, I thought. It had made me stupid, and as Forrest Gump would say, 'stupid is as stupid does.'

"If I wanted you to do it, I would have told you to do it!" he snapped. "Stay exactly where you are. Miss Simon can handle it."

In a perfect world, I would have looked directly into Miss Simon's deep blue eyes. I would have gained the strength from them I required to defy my father. To his shock and amazement, I would demand to be the one to go to the cockpit. Miss Simon would fall instantly in love with me, and my father would develop a sudden deep respect for me. But it wasn't a perfect world. Sinking back down in my seat, I did as I had been told. I couldn't bring myself to look into Miss Simon's eyes.

Dutifully, she unbuckled her belt, grabbing on to the side of her seat to avoid being smashed into the bulkhead. She made her way carefully to the cockpit, her lovely body twisting unnaturally as she clung from seat to seat. I felt her arm brush against my shoulder as she grasped my seat, and I felt deeply ashamed.

“That’s your biggest problem,” my father began to lecture me, ignoring Miss Simon’s travails. “You can never be an effective executive until you learn that menial tasks are to be performed by menial employees. Is that what you want to be—a menial?”

“No, sir,” I muttered just loud enough to be heard over the straining engines. There was no sense in arguing with him. Storm or no storm, he was back in his true form. He seemed to actually gain strength from browbeating me. It had taken his mind off our peril.

It was his fault, though. It was my father who had given the order to the pilot to fly in spite of the gathering storm. We had been in Branson, Missouri, trying to determine what was required to turn a sleepy little town into a country music center second only to Nashville. If we could determine how to duplicate Branson’s success in some underdeveloped community, Martin Brubaker would once again perform another godlike miracle like the ones he had already performed in seven different states on projects too numerous to mention.

We were going to check out several potential communities in Oklahoma. My father had already met with the governor and gotten the political backing he needed. Healthy donations to the campaigns of several key legislators had ensured that whatever community we chose to be the next Branson would have millions of dollars poured into it for new roads and community services. The state would bear the expense and my father would garner the profits. That was why he was the God of Real Estate.

We had appointments set in several small towns on the edges of the Ozarks, and our schedule was tight. Although our pilot had recommended that we delay our flight, my father wouldn’t hear of it. “If you can’t fly us there, I’ll find myself another pilot—one with the balls to fly me where I need to go,” he told the pilot.

Our pilot, Rusty Stoker, had flown fighters in the Gulf War. He had balls the size of watermelons, and he wasn’t used to be talked to like that. His face red with anger, he had replied coldly, “It’s your party.”

“Yes it is,” my father had responded impassively, “and don’t you forget it.”

So here we were, flying into the heart of a Midwestern thunderstorm. Storms over states like Oklahoma produced some of the most intense weather imaginable, from hail and straight-line winds to torrential rain to tornadoes with winds so intense they could drive a stalk of wheat right through a wooden telephone pole. I had never been so afraid in my life.

Miss Simon disappeared into the cockpit just as the plane shuddered. Through the cabin window, I could see a bright flash followed only a couple of seconds later by the crash of thunder roaring over the sounds of our jet engines. There was again a moment of fright in my father’s eyes. As terrified as I was, I took some pleasure in seeing that the great man was actually concerned about his own mortality. That the man who had been instrumental in wrecking so many other lives could be concerned for his own was gratifying.

He recovered quickly, though. After all, he still had me to kick around. “Do you have those files on the towns we have to visit?” he asked gruffly.

“Yes, sir,” I replied, pulling five folders from the pocket in the side of my seat. With my father, I was expected to call him ‘sir’ at all times. I don’t remember ever calling him ‘dad.’

“Let me see them,” he snapped, grabbing them from my hands as the plane shuddered again.

What was it like outside, I wondered, staring into the dark night. The clouds were boiling masses of gray and near-black. Rain was swirling through them, I knew. The winds were whipping it back and forth on its long trip to the ground. Only the power of our two jet engines kept us from being tossed on those winds, mixed with the rain through the dark Oklahoma skies. How much longer would we be in the storm? It couldn’t go on forever.

“This town has promise,” he said, holding up a folder. I couldn’t see the name on the folder, but it didn’t really matter. He wasn’t really

talking to me anyway. Besides, whichever town he picked would be altered beyond all recognition in a few years anyway. He would go in, making everyone in some little town think they were going to be rich. Greed would get him whatever he wanted out of local city councils, banks, even schools. Everyone would be following him around as if he were Professor Harold Hill in the *Music Man*. Then eventually, they would all find out that the only person who was going to get rich from the new venture would be Martin R. Brubaker.

The cockpit door opened again. Miss Simon's husky alto called out, "Rusty says we'll..."

Whatever she was about to say would be lost forever. There was a bright flash just outside the plane, filling the cabin with white light. There was a loud rumble outside the plane which translated into a violent shaking of the entire aircraft. Suddenly, I felt my stomach twist and turn as the plane dropped precipitously, my seat belt practically cutting through my abdomen.

I watched in horror as Miss Simon seemed to fly through the cabin, striking her head on the overhead with a sickening thud. Rusty apparently got control back, for I felt the plane level off and continue normal flight, if it could be said that turbulent shudders constituted normal flight.

I unstrapped my seat belt and rushed to Miss Simon's side. She was unconscious but seemed to be breathing normally.

"Get back in your seat, you goddamned idiot!" my father commanded.

"She's hurt!" I protested. I wanted to help, but I didn't know what to do.

"You will be, too, if you don't belt in!" my father warned. "Leave her where she is until we land."

It was actually good advice. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I was in danger. Just because we had survived so far didn't mean we were out of the woods. Still, I couldn't leave her there, sprawled on the cabin floor. Another bout of turbulence like the last

one and she might be hurt more—even killed.

As I held her gently in my arms, I realized it was the first time I had ever touched her. Her skin was soft and warm as I had imagined it would be, and I found myself wishing that I had never heard of Lucinda Watson.

The plane shook once again. I looked out of a cabin window in time to see another flash of lightning. For a moment, I was actually able to see the clouds. They looked like a human face. I could almost see the face of a man, perhaps middle aged, in glasses. Maybe it was the face of God, I thought. Did that mean God was nearsighted? I had to stifle a hysterical giggle at the thought.

“If you’re going to play the hero, get her up in her seat and strap back in!” my father demanded. I had no illusions about him really caring what might happen to me. No, if I were injured along with Miss Simon, my father would have no one to fetch things for him. He would have to perform menial tasks for himself.

Still, it was good advice. Clumsily, I managed to lift her limp body back into her chair and belt her in. Her head slumped to one side, and for a terrible moment, I wondered if her neck was broken.

I made a quick decision and ran for the cockpit over my father’s protests. We needed to get help for Miss Simon at once.

Rusty was fighting the controls. I was shocked to see his face was as pale as I suspected my own face was. His hands gripped the wheel so tightly that the knuckles appeared twice their normal size. He turned for a second and yelled, “Get back in your seat, you idiot!”

Rusty and I got along great, but he had no more respect for me than any of my father’s other employees did. I jumped into the co-pilot’s seat and buckled in. Looking out of the windshield, I could see nothing but a river of rain, sparkling like a Christmas tree in the dim cockpit lights.

“We need to land!” I yelled over the noise of the storm.

“You’re telling me?” he yelled back.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked.

“Not unless you can conjure up a landing field,” he told me. “This plane was never meant to take this kind of stress. If we don’t find someplace to land quickly, we’re all toast.”

“Can I put out a Mayday?” I asked, reaching for the microphone. “Maybe I can get somebody to light up a field.” There are a large number of small airports all over the country which have lights, but only turn them on as needed.

Rusty shook his head. “Forget it. That last bolt of lightning fried the radio.”

“I thought that wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“So sue the manufacturer!” he snapped.

I looked out the windshield again. “What’s that over there?” I asked.

“Where? Oh, wait. It looks like an airport.”

It did, indeed, look like an airport. Through the sheets of rain, we could both see two strips of parallel lights below us in the distance. There were even lines of approach lights.

“Damned if it doesn’t look like a big airport,” Rusty muttered over a now abating storm.

“Could we be off course?” I asked. “It might be Tulsa.”

“You don’t get off course with GPS,” Rusty explained. “No, we’re out in the middle of Nowhere, Oklahoma. Even Muskogee doesn’t have a strip that modern, and we’re at least fifty miles from there. That airport’s five miles at the most.”

“I don’t care if it’s Twilight Zone International,” I laughed. “Let’s just get this plane on the ground.” I probably wouldn’t have been so anxious if I had known how close to the truth my little joke was.

Rusty’s landing was flawless. Of course, he was helped by the fact that by the time we landed, the wind and the rain had all but stopped. It was as if the area around the airport had some sort of shield which

kept the worst of the storm away. I looked around as we came in, trying to find some landmark that might tell me where we were. There seemed to be the lights of a small town a couple of miles away, but there was no development around the airport. Apparently it wasn't as big as we had thought. I couldn't even see a terminal—just a couple of small, dimly lit metal hangars. There seemed to be a collection of vehicles around one of them, so Rusty taxied over to them.

I rushed back into the cabin without waiting for the plane to stop taxiing. Miss Simon was still unconscious. I rushed to her side.

“Where are we?” my father demanded to know. “Why have we landed? The storm's over.”

“We have to get her to a hospital!” I snapped at him with uncharacteristic courage.

He snorted, “She'll be alright. It's probably just a bump on the head. We have a schedule to keep.”

I bit my tongue rather than tell him what I thought he could do with his precious schedule. Instead, I brushed the hair out of Miss Simon's face, regretting that I had never gotten to know her better. She was the kind of woman I really wanted to know.

I didn't even hear the hatch open. Before I knew, it, two white men and a black woman in medical greens were pushing me away from Miss Simon as they began to check her out.

“It's a concussion,” one of the men proclaimed. I looked at him through tired eyes. What was wrong with him? It was almost as if I could see through him. Not really, but almost. I chalked it up to exhaustion.

“Will she be alright?” I managed to ask.

The black woman answered, “She'll be fine. We'll get her to the hospital right away.”

I looked at the woman. She appeared to be somewhat transparent as well. I knew it had to be exhaustion. What other explanation was there?

The woman led us from the plane. Rusty and I were pretty shaky as we made our way down the ladder, but my father had, unfortunately, regained his composure. He was his usual overbearing self. He pushed away a man at the bottom of the ladder who tried to help him down and blustered, "Get this plane back into the air! We're not supposed to be here. For that matter, just what is this place anyway?"

"You're in Ovid, sir," came a voice from out of the darkness. Then, as he stepped into the light, I could see that the speaker was a police officer. He was tall and slender, with a handsome face and impeccable uniform. He moved with incredible grace as he faced my father. "Ovid, Oklahoma."

"Well, I'm not supposed to be in Ovid, Oklahoma," my father growled. "I don't even know where Ovid, Oklahoma is!"

"It's right here," the officer said, not intimidated in the slightest. Did I detect a thin smile at the corner of his mouth?

"Obviously it's right here," my father conceded, "but I'm not supposed to be. We need to leave at once."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, sir," the officer said, pointing to the tail of our plane. There was a large black scar on the tail, and if I looked closely enough, I could see that at the center of the scar, there was a small hole, maybe six inches in diameter.

"You were struck by lightning," the officer continued. "You were very lucky just to get the plane down. It won't be flying again for some time."

"But I have a schedule to keep!" my father insisted.

"Sir," the officer said politely, "if you'll provide me with a list of your scheduled appointments, we'll make certain that you aren't missed."

My father thought about it for a moment. I could see the wheels in his head turning. There was nothing to be done now except cooperate with the Ovid police officer. "All right," he said at last. "My son can give you the names of the people you need to contact. We need to arrange transportation to get to our next destination. Where can I rent a car?"

The officer shook his head. "The car dealers all rent cars, but there's nothing open this late."

"Then call Tulsa," my father ordered. "They'll send a car from Hertz. My son can give you our authorization number."

I was still fumbling through my attaché case for our agenda. Now I had to try to find our Hertz number as well? The officer saved me the trouble, though.

"It wouldn't do any good," he explained. "There are flash floods between here and Tulsa. You'll just have to wait until morning."

My father sighed. He didn't get to be the God of Real Estate by running into brick walls. Like it or not, we were stuck in Ovid for the night. Tomorrow, we could get a car and be on our way, but not tonight. I handed the officer a copy of our agenda.

The officer smiled. "Now that that's settled, you'll need a place to stay. I'll take you both to the Ovid Inn. They have rooms for you."

"Wait," I said looking around for Rusty. "Our pilot will need a room, too."

"He's been taken to the hospital for observation," the officer told me.

Observation? There had been nothing wrong with him when we landed. Rusty was an ex-fighter pilot. He wasn't hurt during the landing, and he was too much of a John Wayne type to complain about nervous exhaustion or the like.

"Maybe I'd better go see how they're doing at the hospital," I ventured.

The officer shook his head. "The nurse said they would be fine. As soon as you get in your rooms, you can call and find out what their condition is. Now, if you'll come with me, I do need to get you to your rooms."

We followed him to his police car without further protest. My father was uncharacteristically quiet as we drove into town. Then I realized I had seen the mood before. He was sizing up Ovid. Perhaps this would

be the town he was looking for.

As we drove into town, the two-lane road became four lanes, and we were treated to the usual display of gas stations and fast food restaurants that graces the main highway strip of every small town in America. I noticed no national franchises—no McDonald's or Burger Kings. The most prominent fast food joint on the strip was called Rusty's Burger Barn. In fact, it was the only place still open. I checked my watch. It was only ten thirty. Apparently, the sidewalks rolled up early in Ovid.

The Ovid Inn looked like a small town version of Best Western. It was neat and clean, the white stucco front recently repainted. It was an L-shaped building two stories high with all rooms opening to the outside. In front, across the parking lot was the typical motel swimming pool. It was about the size of the hot tub at my father's home. Scattered around the pool was the usual collection of cheap plastic lawn chairs. I doubted if the Ovid Inn had a place in the Mobil Travel Guide.

"Here are your keys," the officer said after we had parked. "Your luggage is already in the rooms. Good night."

Tired, we both muttered good night and got out of the car. After we had shambled halfway to our rooms, I stopped as a thought struck me.

"What's wrong?" my father asked.

"How did that officer make all these arrangements? I didn't see anyone get our luggage out of the plane. And how did he get these room keys? We were with him all the time."

My father shrugged. "I don't know and I'm too tired to find out. I'm sure there's a good explanation for it. Just let it go. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

He was right about that, I realized, so I went to my room. It was a pleasant room—nothing fancy—with cable TV and a comfortable bed. As promised, my bag was already in the room. I got ready for bed, relieved to be still alive after our harrowing flight. I could have used a drink, but I was too tired to get dressed again and find a bar. I settled

for channel flipping.

As I half-watched TV, my suspicions rose again. It wasn't just the police officer's actions that had me wondering. I also began to wonder how during an emergency landing at a seemingly closed airport, there was already an ambulance and a police car waiting to meet us. And why had they taken Rusty away? He had seemed fine to me.

For that matter, where was Ovid, Oklahoma? I pulled a map out of my case. I had been charged with setting up our travel arrangements, and I had never heard of an Ovid, Oklahoma. It appeared to be a large enough town to have captured our interest, but I didn't remember discussing it or ever seeing it on the map. I checked the map index. No Ovid, Oklahoma was even mentioned. I scoured the map, just in case there was a mistake in the index. Maybe that was why we hadn't considered it. But no—I looked from Muskogee to Tulsa west to Oklahoma City and east to the Arkansas line and found no town called Ovid.

But the town obviously existed. We were in it. Towns didn't just crop up over night, I thought as I lay back on the bed. Did they?

I must have been more tired than I realized. I had fallen asleep wondering about Ovid, and suddenly, it was morning. Someone was pounding on my door. "Open up, Junior!" my father's voice was yelling.

Damn, I hated being called 'Junior' I thought as I ambled to the door. My father was framed in the bright morning light. There was a look of utter excitement on his face.

"Look at this," he said, thrusting a phone book in my hand. "And why aren't you dressed? We have a busy day today. Get some clothes on."

I could have used a shower, but I knew from his voice that he meant I was to get dressed that very minute. I set the phone book down on the nightstand and staggered to my suitcase for some clean underwear.

"You didn't even look at the phone book," he noted, sitting in the only

comfortable chair in the room.

“So what’s in the phone book?” I asked, my voice still clogged with sleep.

“Just the background sketch of Ovid,” he said. “This town is perfect. It has a population of about fifteen thousand, so there’s already an infrastructure here. It looks like just a farming town with a little light industry, so it’s clean and folksy. There are lakes and hills all over the area. It’s perfect for our new Branson.”

“It would be,” I agreed, “except for one small detail.”

He frowned. “What’s that?”

“It doesn’t seem to exist.”

“What in hell are you talking about?”

“This town—Ovid.” I threw him the map. “It’s not on the map.”

He threw the map back at me. “So? Some dipshit cartographer screwed up. Maybe they should get together here in Ovid and sue Rand fucking McNally.”

I silently cursed myself. My father’s usual foul mood had been replaced by childish glee and I had ruined it. I had to open my big mouth and tell him that there wasn’t any Santa Claus. Now he would revert to form and be an overbearing bastard all day.

“Okay,” I agreed, trying to recover. “You have to be right. It has to be an oversight on the part of the mapmakers. Obviously, the town is here.”

“Of course it is,” he agreed, somewhat mollified.

“Just let me call the hospital,” I said, as I picked up the receiver and opened the phone book to look up a number. “Then we can discuss the situation at breakfast.”

“Why are you calling the hospital?”

“To check on Rusty and Miss Simon,” I told him. It would never have occurred to the self-centered bastard to call himself.

“Well, make it quick,” he ordered. “We have a lot to talk over.”

A receptionist answered almost at once. “Ovid Memorial Hospital.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’d like to check on the condition of a Rusty Stoker.”

“One moment, please.” I was treated to thirty seconds of elevator music when she came back on the line. “I’m sorry, sir but I don’t show a Rusty Stoker here.”

Maybe they had treated and released him. He might even be here at the Ovid Inn. “Then how about a Miss Simon?” I asked.

“Do you have a first name?”

I was suddenly surprised to realize I had no idea what her first name was. Dad required his staff to be Mr. This and Mrs. That. Since he made sure I never got too familiar with her, I had never asked her for her first name. “No, I’m sorry but I don’t.” No way was I going to ask my father and receive another caustic reply.

“Just a moment, please.”

The elevator music in the background came on again. This time, it sounded like a lethargic version of the old Helen Reddy song, ‘I Am Woman.’

“Hurry up!” my father prodded.

“Just a minute,” I told him.

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“There is no Miss Simon listed here at the hospital.”

That just wasn’t possible. She had been out cold when they took her off the plane. No doctor in his right mind would have released her in that condition. “Then is there another hospital in Ovid?”

“No, sir. We’re the only one.”

“But...”

“Have a nice day, sir.” The line was dead.

“They’re not there,” I told my father as I hung up the phone.

“Not where?” he asked.

“At the hospital,” I said. “They acted as if they had never heard of them. Yet that’s the only hospital in town. What’s going on around here?”

“Never mind,” my father said, grabbing my arm and pulling me toward the door. “We have a lot of work to do today. We need to talk to the mayor—get him in on the action for a small percentage—then we need to check into land prices. We can probably even get the local bank to help us and...”

“You don’t care, do you?” I asked, stopping at the door. “You don’t care what happens to Rusty or Miss Simon as long as you have your land deal.”

My father’s enthusiasm took a back seat to his anger. “Listen, you ingrate, they are employees. No matter what happens to them, I can always get a new pilot and a new secretary. I’m trying to tell you that this town is a potential gold mine. We can buy up half the town before they even know what happened, and you’re worried about two employees whose combined annual earnings probably couldn’t pay to have my suits cleaned.”

“I’m talking about two human beings,” I told him, my voice rising.

His eyes narrowed. “Fine, you worry about them and I’ll worry about business. I gave you a good education. I thought it would teach you what you need to do to succeed. Apparently it was all too theoretical. You haven’t got an entrepreneurial bone in your body. When we get back to New York, you’re fired. You can go see what your fancy degrees will get you out in the real world.”

“That’s fine with me!” I snapped.

I don’t know what we would have said to each other next. I had never stood up to my father so vehemently before. I have to admit, though, that I would have probably backed down and ended up begging for his forgiveness. Such was his power over me. We were both glowering at

each other, fists clenched, when there was a knock on the door. “Mr. Brubaker?” a familiar voice said pleasantly.

I opened the door. The same police officer who had taken us to our rooms the night before was standing there in the morning light.

“Good morning, officer,” I said pleasantly, wondering if he had come by to bring us news of our pilot and secretary.

My father made a different assumption, more in keeping with his character. “Good. I’m glad you’re here. I want to see your mayor as soon as possible. I have a proposition for him that I know he will appreciate. Let’s go.”

The officer continued to stand in the doorway. “I’m sorry, sir. I’m not here to escort you to the mayor. The Judge has issued a warrant for your arrest. Now, if you will come with me...”

My father’s face reddened at once. “What are you blabbering about? My proposition is more important than some trumped up charge from some tank town Judge. You’d better give me the name of that Judge so I can have him reprimanded.”

“What is the charge, officer?” I asked as politely as I could. I had heard stories about how small town justice worked. Often, it was a matter of quietly paying a small fine and moving on. I knew my father’s attitude was bound to raise the ante.

“Unsafe operation of an aircraft,” he replied seriously.

My father exploded, “What the hell are you talking about? We weren’t operating the aircraft. Our pilot was. Haul him in on your dip shit charges and let us go about our business.”

I think he would have been furious under any conditions, but our argument had meant that he was starting from a higher level of irritation. We would be lucky if the officer didn’t pull his gun and shoot us for resisting arrest the way my father was carrying on. I finally laid my hand on his arm and said softly, “Come on, sir. We can get this taken care of quickly. I’m sure Officer...”

“Mercer, sir.”

“Yes. Officer Mercer will be happy to take us to see the mayor after we’ve taken care of this in court, won’t you, Officer?”

Without changing his expression, Officer Mercer replied, “If you still want to see the mayor after the Judge has dealt with you, I will be happy to escort you to see the mayor.”

“There, you see, sir?” I said calmly. “We don’t have to be concerned.”

“Very well,” he huffed at last. “But this had better not take long or my lawyers will be all over your little kangaroo court. Is that clear, Officer?”

“Very clear, sir.”

As we rode to see the Judge, I began to see what my father had meant about Ovid. It was a typical Midwestern community in many ways, but there was a difference, too. Everything looked clean. Not new, necessarily, but clean. There was no trash lying in the gutters, no graffiti on the buildings, and all the lawns were neatly trimmed and sidewalks clean. It was almost a Hollywood version of small town America, showing all of its virtues and none of its faults.

Then, I saw the first thing which disturbed me. As we stopped at a stoplight, I saw what appeared to be a day-care attendant ushering her charges into a nearby playground. As we drove past, I got a good look at the ten or so children she was supervising. All but two of them had that same strange transparent look I had noticed at the airport. There, I had chalked it up to fatigue, but I was now operating on a full night’s sleep. Even the attendant looked a little transparent. Strangely enough, the two normal children didn’t seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. The light changed and we were on our way before I could comment on my observation.

When I was a boy, I used to watch old reruns of the Twilight Zone. Ovid was starting to remind me of that show. Why? Because it was too normal. It was like those Heaven on Earth fantasies where someone from the big city finds relief from his troubles in the small, nearly perfect town of his youth. Well, sorry, Ovid, I thought. I was born and raised in the city, and while I might not have enjoyed growing

up under my father's thumb, I certainly didn't want to settle down in Ovid. In fact, I wasn't too sure I even wanted my father investing in Ovid. Something wasn't right in this perfect little town, I realized.

Officer Mercer pulled into the parking lot of a building that I assumed was what passed for a municipal building in Ovid. It wasn't an unattractive building, but why the city fathers had decided to place Doric columns in front of a fairly modern building was beyond me.

There was none of the activity of large city courts in Ovid. I had attended many court hearings, and I had observed dozens of lawyers rushing from room to room, conferencing with clients, and on the phone. There was none of this in Ovid. The halls were deserted.

Officer Mercer led us into a fairly impressive courtroom. There was only one person in the spectator's gallery—an attractive blonde who seemed to be watching our ordeal with mild amusement. Another woman, a fairly attractive brunette, was seated at one of the attorney's tables. She appeared to be fresh out of law school. She was stylishly dressed in a beige business suit and was intently reading a document she held over her open brief case. She seemed to be having a little trouble reading it.

"Damn contacts," she muttered as we approached. Looking at Officer Mercer, she said, "Tell the Judge that right after this case, I need to go get my glasses. These contacts aren't quite right."

"He said that's fine," Officer Mercer said. It sounded like an odd thing to say. How could he say it was fine when he hadn't heard her problem or been in the room to reply to her? The bad feeling I was getting about Ovid was getting worse.

Turning to us, the woman said, "I'm Susan Jager. I'm your attorney for today's trial."

"No you're not," my father said belligerently. "I'm not about to be represented by some little cheerleader fresh out of some podunk law school. I'd rather represent myself."

She nodded at me. "Does that go for you, too?"

“It goes for him, too,” my father replied.

She looked at us with what almost looked like pity. Then, with a sigh, she closed her briefcase and said, “Suit yourselves.”

“All rise,” Officer Mercer suddenly intoned. “The city court for the City of Ovid is now in session, the Honorable Judge presiding.”

A rather distinguished looking man of middle age stepped out of chambers and assumed his post at the bench. I couldn’t help but think he looked a little like that face I had seen in the clouds. He looked down at us over the top of gold-rimmed glasses and said with a soft accent, “You may be seated. Next case?”

“The case of Martin R. Brubaker and Martin R. Brubaker, Junior,” the officer said formally.

“You are charged with unsafe operation of an aircraft. Counsel, how do your clients plead?”

The young woman rose to her feet. “Your honor, the defendants have refused to accept me as counsel.”

The Judge looked at my father and me with utter disdain. “Let it be noted that the defendants have declined counsel.”

“Your Honor!” my father said leaping to his feet. “This is a travesty of justice. My son and...”

“Are you an attorney, sir?” the Judge asked in a cultured Southern voice.

“No, but...”

“Then I will thank you to be silent in my courtroom until you are addressed. Is that clear?”

In my entire life, I had never seen my father back down from anyone, but he backed down from this strange magistrate. The Judge’s frown was almost a personification of the expression ‘if looks could kill.’ The Judge’s look at us seemed almost lethal. My father self-consciously sat back down.

“Now that we have that matter settled,” the Judge said, “let’s continue with the trial. How do the two of you plead?”

My father rose with as much dignity as he could still muster. “Your Honor, my son and I plead not guilty.”

The Judge shifted in his seat. “Very well. Officer Mercer?”

“Yes, Your Honor?”

“Did you see these two men disembark from an airplane which had just been observed operating unsafely over the city of Ovid?”

“I did, Your Honor,” the officer replied formally.

Turning to us, the Judge asked, “Did you disembark from the plane in question?”

If it hadn’t been such a serious situation, I would have laughed. It was if the Judge was intentionally making a travesty of the trial. Surely he must have realized that the results of the trial would be overturned as soon as my father got to his attorneys.

“Of course we did!” my father snapped.

“And who owns the aircraft in question?”

“I do, Your Honor,” my father admitted.

“Then it seems obvious to me that you are responsible for the unsafe operation of the aircraft,” the Judge said.

My father was practically sputtering. “But I wasn’t flying the airplane. That was my pilot’s job. If you want to accuse someone of unsafe flying, charge him!”

“I’ve already dispensed judgement on your pilot,” the Judge replied to our surprise. “I must say he accepted his fate much more civilly than you are. I must also point out that while he flew the plane, you were the one in charge of it, Mr. Brubaker. No pilot would have made the decision to fly into that storm. Only a fool like you would have put so many lives at risk.”

“You can’t talk to me that way!” my father shouted. Then, to my

astonishment, the Judge made a sudden motion with his hand and my father stopped speaking. He didn't close his mouth. In fact, his mouth was still open, and he was trying to yell at the Judge, but nothing was coming out. In shock, he reached for his throat, trying to determine what had gone wrong.

The Judge smiled. "That's more like it, Mr. Brubaker. Don't worry. Your condition isn't permanent. You'll be able to speak in a few minutes, but not in the voice you are expecting to hear. I must say, Mr. Brubaker, I don't like you. Many men have faced my Judgement, and I have dealt with them fairly to the best of my ability. I shall do so with you as well—with pleasure. I don't need to hear what you were about to say. I know it from your mind. You were about to threaten me by telling me that you know the governor."

One look at my father's widening eyes told me that that was exactly what he had been about to tell the Judge.

"Well, I know him, too," the Judge went on. "In fact, I play golf with him this afternoon. I would give him your regards, but by tee time, he won't have the slightest idea who you are. I also know about your little scheme to turn Ovid into the next Branson. Well, let me tell you something, Mr. Brubaker, Ovid is far too valuable to be turned into the tourist trap you propose. You will not have the opportunity to disrupt the lives of the people in our community, or any other community for that matter. Now, as to the matter of judgement."

My father lurched around and walked awkwardly to face the Judge at the foot of his bench. Then, I felt invisible hands grab me and pull me to his side. It was as if I had lost complete control of every part of my body. In moments, both of us were facing the Judge.

"Mr. Martin Brubaker, Senior," the Judge intoned, much as I suspected God would do when my father was called to his last judgement, "you have controlled and manipulated people all of your adult life. I think it is time you learned how the other half lives."

Then, he began to speak in a language I had never heard before—at least not the way he spoke it. It sounded vaguely like Latin, but not the

Latin you hear in high schools or from the lips of priests. This Latin was a living language, fluid and robust, and the words seemed to have a power I could feel. I watched my father actually cringe under the force of the words. I don't know what I had been expecting, but it wasn't this. My father had changed from indignant to frightened, and I was beginning to become frightened myself.

Then, the Judge was silent. In fact, the entire courtroom was silent. My father just stood there with a tired, defeated look on his face.

"And now for you, Mr. Martin Brubaker, Junior," I felt my blood suddenly run cold. "You have not had a chance to follow your father's path to selfishness and vanity. There may, in fact, be hope for you. My sentence of you carries with it a chance for happiness and contentment, if you are intelligent enough to find it. Goodbye to you, Mr. Brubaker."

With that, the Latin chanting began again, but the words were different. I never took Latin, so I had no idea what he was saying, but I began to feel the power of the words much as my father must have felt them. I felt an odd tingling sensation which seemed to come simultaneously from every part of my body. Then, as suddenly as it began, the sensation stopped. The sudden silence was finally broken by the sound of a gavel.

"Case dismissed. Next case," the Judge said, a note of satisfaction in his voice.

Case dismissed? Why was he letting my father and I go with just an odd speech in Latin? That didn't seem likely at all.

"Come on, let's go," my father said. Or at least the words came from my father's mouth. There was something odd about the way he said it. His voice had developed a slight twang, not unlike a milder version of the twang that seemed to be endemic to everyone who lived in Oklahoma.

My father began to stride from the courtroom, and there was nothing, I realized, that I could do except to follow at his heels like the obedient puppy I had been most of my life.

We were silent as we walked from the courtroom, but there was something odd about my father. In addition to the twang in his voice, he seemed a little shorter. His suit didn't fit him quite right. I was so busy trying to figure out what the problem was that I nearly tripped on my own pants leg. I looked down. My pants seemed too long suddenly, and they felt as if they didn't fit properly.

"I swear, it gets harder and harder to get your driver's license renewed every time," my father muttered.

"What did you say?" I asked. I had a sudden feeling of panic. What my father had said made no sense whatsoever. I was beginning to wonder if the anger he had exhibited in the courtroom had brought on a mild stroke. I had heard of such things happening.

"Weren't you listening?" he said. "I was talking about driver's licenses. Why, when I was your age, it didn't take no time at all to get a new one. Now, you got to wait in a line that looks like the line in front of St Peter on Judgement Day."

My father used a double negative, I realized. I had never heard him do that in my entire life. He was a Harvard graduate in his own right. I didn't think he knew how to be grammatically incorrect. And what was this muttering about a driver's license?

As I pondered these issues, I felt a sudden tingle run through my body. It was as if I had suddenly been moved almost imperceptibly from one point in the universe to another. Something was rubbing on my chest. Something else was tickling my neck. It felt almost as if my entire body were suddenly encased in thin spider silk, shifting in the breeze as I walked.

My father made his way to an aging Ford F-150 pickup truck, white except for the innumerable rust spots. He opened the door with a key that seemed to appear suddenly in his hand. Unlocking the other door from inside, he called, "Well, what are you waiting for? Your daddy will be expecting us home for dinner. You know how he gets when it ain't on the table on time. Now get in."

What was he talking about? Shaken, I did get in—not because I felt I

had to, but because I was just too stunned to do anything else. I felt almost as if I was an observer in my own body. My actions seemed to be independent of my thought.

My father methodically put the truck in gear without difficulty. I had never seen him drive a manual transmission in my life, yet he handled it effortlessly. I looked at him closely. There was something different about him, but I couldn't quite determine what it was. Then, I realized what had happened. He was no longer wearing his suit coat, yet it wasn't on the seat beside him. He had been wearing it when he got in the truck, yet now it was gone. That suit cost more than most people made in a month, yet he didn't seem upset that the jacket was missing.

I continued to stare at him, only to realize that whatever was happening was ongoing. His body seemed to lose focus, almost like an image on an aging TV. It blurred around the edges and seemed to be changing as I watched. My father had been balding, but now, he sported a full head of hair, long and pulled back in a bun. It was mostly a dull brown, but here and there were streaks of gray. His sallow, unhealthy pallor had become much pinker, almost rosy, and the wrinkles in his skin seemed to be disappearing. If I hadn't known his actual age, I would have mistaken him for someone in their late thirties—early forties at the most instead of the fifty-five I knew him to be.

As we drove along the Ovid streets, even his clothing was beginning to change. His white dress shirt had already turned to a faded denim blue and seemed to be cascading over his body like a waterfall until it had formed a long, shapeless garment which I realized in shock to be a dress. The sleeves had shortened, revealing slender, nearly hairless arms. I caught my breath as I watched two shapes begin to rise from his chest.

My father—if the person seated next to me could even be called my father—stared at me as we came to a stop at a traffic light. “What’s wrong, honey?” The voice was a full octave higher than my father’s voice. Equally as odd was that there was genuine concern in his—

her?—voice.

“Nothing...” I managed to say, uncertain as to what I should say. Was I supposed to tell my father that he was swiftly becoming what appeared to be a woman? What would he think of that? Or worse yet, would he think anything of it at all?

Then, I realized I had been so mesmerized watching my father’s transformation that I had paid no attention to what was happening to my own form. My voice, I suddenly realized, had also changed pitch, becoming higher like my father’s. Also, there was a little of the twang I had noticed in the voices of Oklahoma natives.

I looked down, not entirely surprised to see that I no longer wore a suit. The top button of my now plaid short sleeved shirt popped open of its own accord, and I was greeted with the sight of two substantial mounds of my own. My arms were smooth and hairless, my hands small and delicate. I was wearing jeans as well, but they fit oddly, contracting at the waist while pooling around my hips. I felt a sudden length of hair down the back of my neck and seemed to know instinctively that it had arranged itself into a long ponytail.

There was no question as to what I was becoming. The only question was how. Even in my stupor, I realized that this was the sentence the Judge had spoken of. I was to be a girl, as was my father. But what possible force of law or nature could do what had been done to us? I wasn’t a religious individual, but to my knowledge, even God Himself had never doled out justice of this sort.

“You look a little faint, Donna Mae,” she—for I knew it was now she—said to me.

“Just a little hot,” I managed to respond, trying to be as nonchalant about the changes as possible. It was apparent to me that whatever had happened to my father had affected his mind as well as his body. She seemed to notice nothing out of the ordinary, as if she had been whoever she now was all of her life. Would that also happen to me? My transformation seemed to be a few minutes behind my father’s. Perhaps I would slowly lose the knowledge of who I had been,

suddenly believing myself to have always been this Donna Mae she thought I was. I shuddered at the thought. I wanted to be me. I wanted to remember who I had been and become that person again. To be changed in body was bad enough. To be changed in body and mind was like a death sentence.

She laughed, "Honey, it ain't hot yet. It ain't even June yet. This is as nice a day as you'll ever see."

Actually, I was hot. The truck lacked air conditioning, and the air blowing in from the partially opened windows was warm and humid, a harbinger of an Oklahoma summer yet to come. I suspected, though, that my profuse perspiring was due more to the shock of what was happening to me than to the heat.

"Soon as we get home," she continued, "I want you to go out and get me a dozen fresh eggs. I'm gonna devil 'em for your daddy. You know how he likes 'em. Make sure you just have a couple and leave most of 'em for him."

"There's a supermarket," I said spying a place called 'Duggan's IGA.'

"What do we want with a supermarket?" she asked, puzzled.

"Eggs," I reminded her.

"Since when do we need a supermarket for eggs?" she asked.

"Something wrong with the chickens?"

What chickens?

We drove right on past the market, off past the edge of town. There was nothing but cropland ahead, as far as the eye could see. She seemed to know where she was going. I let her drive and tried to concentrate on what had happened to me. Looking into the side mirror, I saw the face of a young woman, perhaps sixteen or so. She had nondescript brown hair and eyes to match. Her skin was lightly tanned with a few freckles on her cheeks and nose. She was not unattractive, but the apparent absence of any makeup gave her a girlish rather than a womanly look. I looked down at my hands. I was relieved to find that my nails were cut short and mannish.

After about two miles or so, we pulled into a gravelled driveway. There was a mailbox attached to a post, and she drove as close to it as she could.

“Well, aren’t you going to get the mail?”

“Huh?” I responded.

She sighed, “I swear, girl, you are addled. Now get that mail or you’ll have to run back out here on foot to get it.”

I climbed out of the truck, feeling for the first time the odd shift of weight in my body. I seemed to be projecting outward both in the front and the rear, and the ponytail running down my back flopped up gently from side to side. I was shorter, too, I realized than I had been when I got in the truck.

The mailbox had the name Potter printed in neat white letters on the side. I reached in the box and pulled out several letters and advertising circulars, dutifully taking them back to the truck. On top of the stack, now resting in my lap, was an advertisement inviting Donna Mae Potter to check out careers in today’s Army. So that’s who I was. I had become a Donna Mae Potter. Sitting next to me, presumably, was a Mrs. Potter—my mother. What was going on?

“So the Army wants you,” she commented, slipping the truck back into gear. “I don’t know what they’d want with girls. It just don’t seem right.”

It didn’t seem right—that was for certain, and I didn’t mean the fact that the Army wanted girls.

“A girl like you needs to settle down and have a family now that your school is over.”

School was over? That made me more like eighteen. It had to be the absence of makeup that made me look so much younger. That was fine with me, though. I had no interest in wearing makeup. I didn’t care if I looked like I was ten years old. No way would I wear makeup. Not now—not ever.

As for the settling down and having a family life, it sounded very

ominous. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I certainly didn't plan on having a family. I planned on finding out why I had been changed into a girl and what I could do about changing back. In the meantime, a little voice told me I should act the part I had been given until I could determine what could be done to return me and my father to our normal states. I hoped I could pull it off. I didn't have the slightest notion how to be a teenage girl.

Not far from the road was an aging farmhouse. It was neat and had a fresh coat of white paint on its clapboard siding, but it was old, showing obvious signs of wear. It was nestled in a grove of trees which had obviously been planted many years ago to shield the house from the hot Oklahoma sun. Not far away was a barn with a tractor and several items of farm equipment whose functions I could only guess at parked haphazardly.

As we approached the house, I could see a man in overalls stand up next to the tractor. He had apparently been working on the machine, for he was wiping his oily hands on a white towel which was becoming blacker by the minute. He was tall, perhaps six-three, although with my reduced height, I might have overestimated that. He was lean with a dark skin tanned from continual exposure to the sun. A shock of dark hair, thinning at the front, blew in the light spring breeze. But his most striking feature was that he was transparent. Again, by transparent, I mean that if I tried very hard, I could almost see through him, just like the children on the playground and the people at the airport.

"'Bout time you got back," he said calmly in the ever-present Oklahoma drawl. "Thought you must'a done some shoppin' while you were in town."

"Haven't got nothin' worth shoppin for," she said, getting out of the truck. "I know how you hate for me to spend money on frills."

"Ain't enough money in farming for frills," he drawled. "I ain't had no dinner, though. You'd better get me somethin' real quick."

I didn't like the way he said that to her. I supposed she was my mother

now and he was supposed to be my father, whatever he really was. He was overbearing, though, acting as if she were the hired help instead of his wife. Could I have guessed wrong about their relationship? I didn't think so.

After she had descended from the truck, I got my first good look at the woman my father had become. She was short—even shorter than I. I guessed her to be no more than five-two or three. She may have had a pleasant figure at one time, but now she was a little on the pudgy side, walking with a bit more of a waddle than a sway.

"I'll have dinner ready in a jiffy," she told him, unperturbed at the way he had talked to her. She turned to me. "Donna Mae, you go get them eggs like I told you."

I looked around. Where were the chickens? I knew nothing about farms. I had never been on one in my life. I was strictly a city kid.

"What are you waitin' for?" the man growled. "I gotta show you where the hen house is or something?"

Actually, that would have been helpful. I was saved asking that question when I heard the sudden squawk of a chicken from somewhere behind the house. I rushed to the back of the house in search of eggs.

Of course, I had never been in a hen house before. The smell that assaulted my new nose was a strong one of chicken feed, feathers, and waste. Several chickens were nesting—or whatever chickens do—in the poorly lit and ventilated space. There was a basket on a small shelf next to the chickens. I picked it up, trying to determine how I would find the eggs. Did I have to lift the chickens? No, I realized. The eggs rolled down a little chute, collecting in front of the chickens. Apparently my first chore was going to be an easy one. Quickly, I filled the basket with eggs and made my way back to the house.

I assumed correctly that the kitchen was toward the back of the house. My new mother was already preparing food with a couple of mixing bowls on the counter while three steaks popped and sizzled in an open skillet. Pan-fried steak, I realized. She was making a meal that

would harden the arteries of the heartiest individual. I had always tried to be careful of what I ate, and this food was deadly. I knew, though, that I would have no choice but to eat it. The thought of eating so much unhealthy food was almost as unsettling as becoming a girl—almost, but not quite.

“Well, girl, set the table and make the drinks,” she ordered. “I still got to make these devilled eggs for supper.”

Set the table with what? Make what drinks? My shoulders slumped in resignation. There was no way in the world I could pull off this impersonation. I didn’t even know where the glasses were. Then a strange thing began to happen. On a whim, I simply cleared my mind. I was, after all, suffering from a mental overload, probably not too dissimilar from what people experience during a nervous breakdown. My body just seemed to respond to knowledge I lacked on a conscious level. As I walked forward toward the kitchen cabinets, my hands reached instinctively upward into one of them, opening it to expose a collection of tumblers. I removed three of them without thinking.

Now, what to put in them? Again, my body froze. I had no conscious idea what drinks to make. I willed myself back into the near-alpha state again, and my body walked to the refrigerator, filled the glasses with ice, and withdrew a large cold pitcher of lemonade from one of the shelves. I set the glasses on the table and allowed my body to find knives and forks. When I took full control again, lunch was ready.

As relieved that I was that I had been able to perform a few simple functions without giving away the fact that I was an impostor, I was also unsettled at the thought that I could so easily surrender control of myself to some unknown force which required me to act like Donna Mae Potter. How pervasive was this force? If I surrendered to it entirely, would I become like my father had become? Perhaps that was what he had done. Perhaps the shock of his transformation had caused him to slip into a mental fugue, now held prisoner in his own transformed body while another personality ruled his very existence. It was not a pleasant thought. I would have to be careful how I used the

autonomic state.

“George,” my new mother called out, “dinner’s ready.”

Dinner? Then I remembered. In many rural areas, lunch was called dinner. Supper was the evening meal.

My ‘father’ ambled into the room, carrying a thin newspaper which declared itself to be the Ovid Clarion. He plopped down wordlessly at the head of the table, buried his face in the newspaper, and waited to be served. The effrontery of this clod, I thought! He began to shovel food into his mouth boorishly, offering no acknowledgement as to if it was good, bad, or indifferent. It was as if we weren’t even there. I had seen this type of behavior before when I was younger. My father—that is to say, my real father—often treated my mother in a similar fashion. As much as I was disgusted by my new father’s behavior, it was poetic justice to watch my father—now apparently my mother—suffer the fate he had dealt out before.

As for my new mother, she watched him take the first few bites with a nervous expression. Then, once he had chewed and swallowed without criticism, she relaxed and began to dish up food for herself and for me.

The food was actually quite tasty, but there was far too much of it. I noticed my ‘mother’ was just a little pudgy, and the diet was obviously part of the reason. My ‘father’ was slimmer, and I assumed it was the hard work of farming that kept him that way. As for my new body, it was slim, but hardly model slim. I realized if I became stuck in Ovid for the rest of my life, I would have to learn to eat sparingly or I would begin to resemble my mother.

Another point about the food—it was all bad for us. There was obviously too much fat in the diet, and the fried steak, accompanied with fried potatoes, was probably hardening even my young arteries rapidly. There was at least a helping of corn on my plate. I resolved to eat it and leave as much of the potatoes and steak as I could.

“Honey, you’re hardly eating,” she commented. “Do you feel okay? It isn’t that time of the month for you, is it?”

Time of the month? Holy shit! I had that to look forward to also. What else could go wrong? “No—mom—I’m just not hungry.”

She smiled a motherly smile. Was my father still in there at all? “You’re probably just excited about graduating and all. Is Charlene still coming by to pick you up to get your gown?”

I hoped she meant a graduation gown. I was now eligible to wear the other kind as well. “Yes,” I replied, although I didn’t have the slightest idea who Charlene was or if she was coming by for me.

She nodded. “Then you’d better go get ready. She’ll probably be here any minute.”

As if on cue, there was the sound of a car coming to a halt on the gravel driveway. A horn honked twice. Apparently, my ride had arrived. I started to run out the door. Anything to get away from this madhouse.

“Don’t forget your purse!” ‘mother’ called out to me. Where was it? As if reading my mind, she said, “I saw it on the couch in the living room this morning.”

I grabbed the worn brown purse that was lying on the couch and slung it over my shoulder in what I hoped was a normal fashion.

“Now be careful,” my new mother said, scurrying to fill my ‘father’s’ now-empty plate again. With any luck, maybe the son of a bitch would have a coronary before I got back. I had a feeling I was in for treatment no better than my mother. He was a misogynist if ever I had seen one. Just because I was his daughter, I could not expect decent treatment from him. After all, I was only a girl. I flushed in anger at the thought. I hadn’t asked to be a girl. Of course, when I thought about it, girls that are born that way didn’t ask to be girls either.

Charlene proved to be a girl about my size and build, although there the resemblance ended. She had long red hair, flowing freely down her back and wore flattering makeup on her pretty face. As I got into her car, I saw she was wearing a tank top and shorts. She was a real person, too—not one of those oddly transparent people. She gave me

a broad smile.

“So what do you think?” she asked.

“About what?” I returned.

“The car, silly,” she said as if I was the fool of the day. “My mother’s car—she let me take it today. Isn’t that great?”

“Yeah,” I responded, not having the slightest idea what she was talking about. “That’s terrific.”

I was living in hell, I thought as we retraced the route into Ovid that my ‘mother’ and I had taken earlier that day. This morning, I was a young man with a bright future. I was heir to one of the largest real estate fortunes in the country, in my twenties, due to marry a girl with all the right connections, and an MBA from a prestige school. Now, I was fresh off the farm waiting to pick up my high school diploma which would probably qualify me to waitress in that burger joint I saw last night. And of course, I was a girl. I didn’t have the foggiest notion how to be a girl, and I didn’t want to learn.

Here I was, in a car with a girl I presumed was supposed to be my best friend. I had no idea who she was, other than her first name. I supposed it could have been worse. The person who picked me up for a ride into Ovid could have been a large hulking lineman from the high school football team with an IQ slightly lower than the car he drove, and he could have called me ‘Babe’ all the way into town, his meaty arm draped over my tiny shoulders. I shuddered again. Shuddering was starting to be what I did best in this body.

“After we get our gowns, let’s go to Personnel at March’s,” Charlene said brightly.

“March’s?” I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Yeah,” she said. “I want to put in an application there. I hear they pay sales associates pretty well—for Ovid, at least.”

“Oh.” Whatever March’s was.

“You know, you should apply, too,” she said. “That nonsense your dad

is always spouting about how girls should be raising families instead of working is really a pile of crap. I mean, jeez, it's almost the twenty-first century. That barefoot and pregnant horse shit went out with high button shoes and celluloid collars."

Not on the Potter farm, I realized. What had I gotten myself into? Whatever it was, it didn't look good.

I had been on the fringes of Ovid's business district when I had been driven to my trial, but this was my first opportunity to see it close up and personal. It was really Small Town America, but most certainly a prosperous version of it. My father and I had travelled all over the region in search of the next Branson and had been greeted with decaying business districts and declining populations wherever we went. Small towns were dying, unless they were close to cities, and there they grew as bedroom communities, slowly losing their identities until they were connected to the cities they served by a never-ending string of fast food restaurants and discount stores. Ovid, though, showed no signs of decay, and it certainly wasn't close to any large city, I imagined. In fact, I wasn't even sure Ovid was on the planet Earth. It was as if it existed... somewhere else.

There wasn't a boarded up store or vacant lot to be seen in the downtown area. Even the offices over the retail shops appeared occupied by a variety of professionals. Storefronts were clean with up-to-date window displays and inviting entrances. The residents of Ovid were dressed casually but prosperously, and everyone seemed to be happy. I felt like I had been suddenly thrust into the movie Truman, complete with smiling, happy citizens and clean streets. Of course, there was one important difference. Many of the residents of Ovid were semi-transparent.

We parked on the street about half a block from a three story building which had the name March's prominently displayed on the front and side in large red letters. It wasn't exactly Bloomingdale's, but it would have to do. For a small town, it actually looked like a fairly impressive store.

Fortunately, Charlene knew just where to go. I followed her up to the

third floor where the Special Services department had our graduation gowns and mortarboards. We were each issued one by a smiling clerk. The gowns were gold with black trim while the mortarboards were black with a gold tassel. Charlene was excited when she tried hers on. Graduation from high school was the biggest event in her life. I wonder what she would have thought if she had known that the last time I wore an outfit like the one I now had on was to receive my MBA at Harvard.

Our gowns on hangars wrapped in plastic, Charlene said, "Personnel is on this floor. Let's go fill out job applications."

"Charlene," I began, "I don't think I want to... well, I mean..." Suddenly, I realized I didn't have a single good reason not to fill one out. What was I going to do with myself after I got my high school diploma? There was no wealthy father waiting in the wings to send me off to the best schools. Living and working on the farm would be a true version of hell. It would only be a matter of time until my new father decided it was time to marry me off to some other farmer. Of course, I didn't want to stay in this form in the first place, but something told me that I was probably doomed to be Donna Mae Potter for the rest of my life.

"Okay," I said at last. "Let's fill out those applications."

Charlene squealed with excitement and practically ran to Personnel.

We sat together at a table in the break room with our applications. Charlene was working diligently on hers, but I had paused on mine. I suddenly realized I didn't know most of the information required on the form. I dug into my purse, pulling out a worn wallet and sorted through the cards that were there. No credit cards, I noticed, but there was a Social Security card, a driver's license, and a high school ID there. I managed to get most of the information filled in from them. Of course, I had no idea how to answer the work history questions, but I suspected Donna Mae had always had to work on the farm after school. I wrote that down on the application.

As I finished the application, I happened to think that working at

March's might be a good thing after all. It would get me off the farm and provide me with a reasonable income. I wasn't sure I wanted to spend the rest of my new life clerking in a department store, but it was a start. Anything would be better than living on the farm.

A clerk took our finished forms and with a smile said, "If we have any openings, we'll be giving you a call in the next few days."

We thanked her and turned to leave. Maybe it was because I was still sleepwalking into my new life, or maybe it was because I wasn't used to the balance of my new body, but when I swung around to leave, I swung too wide, colliding with someone in the process.

"I'm so sorry!" I apologized to the woman I had run into. Then I took a good look at her. She was without a doubt the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my entire life. She had hair the color of spun gold, literally gleaming in the overhead lights, and every strand of it was long, full, and absolutely in place. Her body was incredibly beautiful and in absolutely perfect proportion. Her face was flawless and almost angelic, but with a hint of mischief which made her look both complex and intelligent. She was dressed in a gray suit with a lavender silk blouse underneath. It made her look both professional and feminine at the same time. As much as I wanted my masculine form back, I found myself experiencing feelings of awe and envy—awe because of her great beauty and envy because as a new woman, I had none of it.

She smiled, and it was as if soft music played when she spoke.

"That's quite all right. You're new here, aren't you?"

"New?" I asked.

"To Ovid, I mean."

I looked around. Charlene was out of earshot, talking with someone who looked to be about our age. I realized she must have met one of our school chums. "Yes... yes I am," I admitted. "I didn't know anyone else knew about me."

She laughed gently. "Most people will not know. Well, if you will excuse me, it was nice running into you, Donna Mae." With that, she

was gone, her body swaying gracefully.

“Wow!” Charlene said, moving to my side. “That should help you get a job here.”

“Why?” I asked, puzzled.

“Are you kidding?” she laughed. “That was Vera March.”

“As in March’s Department Store?” I asked with a gasp.

“None other.”

My spirits fell. For the few minutes I had spent filling out the application, I had visions of a life independent of an overbearing father and passive mother. No more farm life for me. I would move into town and work at someplace like March’s. At least I would have my own life—not just the one the Judge had assigned me to. Now, I realized that I didn’t have a chance. Vera March would want women working in her store who had at least some style and grace. I was fresh off the farm in my new body. Had I actually been a girl, I might have had a chance. At least I would know the fundamentals of clothing and makeup. But I knew none of that. Maybe I could get a job in the local feed and seed store.

Then on the way out of the store, a thought struck me. Vera March had asked if I was new, and yet she called me by name. How strange...

Charlene dropped me off at the farm. It was about four, but already the smells of cooking food were wafting through the house. My new mother came bustling out of the kitchen when she heard me come in.

“Thank god you got home early!” she gushed. “You’ve got to go get all dressed up. Your daddy invited over that nice Mr. Spencer from down the road.”

I was missing something here. Why did this mean I had to get ‘all dressed up?’

“Mr. Spencer?” I repeated. I seemed to be doing a lot of that lately.

“You know, the young man who inherited his family’s farm last year.

He's a nice looking fella, and he's single, Donna Mae."

Oh my god. The significance finally got through to me. My new mother and father's little comments about the role I would be expected to play in life were making sense now. They intended to introduce me to an eligible bachelor and get me married off as soon as possible. But they couldn't do that, could they? I mean, this was the United States.

Things like arranged marriages just didn't happen here, did they? Apparently they did, and if I didn't think fast, I would be part of one.

For now, though, there was nothing to do but go along. If I refused, I might be thrown out of the house on my ear. My new father seemed perfectly capable of doing that if I defied his will. I would have to cooperate until I had an alternative.

"What do you want me to wear?" I asked with a sigh.

Was it my imagination, or did 'mom' suddenly look relieved? I wondered if she thought I would balk at her request.

"Wear that nice little blue dress you got for your birthday," she suggested.

"Could you help me, mom?" I asked. I had no idea what dress she was talking about. "Maybe you could show me what to wear with it."

She was silent for a moment, as if debating whether to desert her kitchen to help me or not. At last, she decided it was such a rare treat to have a teenage daughter ask about apparel and accessories that she couldn't resist. I think I really realized at that moment that either my real father was completely gone or embedded so far in the person he had become that he might as well be gone. Then a thought struck me as we made our way upstairs. What if my father was still in her somewhere, observing everything, yet unable to act, or at least unable to act out of character? If that were so, it was the most diabolical prison ever created. I found myself hoping for my father's sake that it wasn't so.

So for the first time in my life and embarrassed practically to tears, I slipped on a dress. The dress she had suggested for me looked like

something out of a bad movie. I didn't know much about women's fashions, but I knew a rather turquoise blue dress with plain short sleeves, a skirt that came down to my knees, and buttons up the front was anything but the height of fashion. Add to them a pair of white flats with no stockings and all I was lacking was a straw hat with the price tag still on it.

"Here, let's let your hair free," mom said, pulling off the scrunchie that had kept my hair in a ponytail. I had to admit, it looked better loose. I was still rather plain, but I could imagine something could be done with that hair... What was I thinking? The only thing I really wanted was to cut all that hair off—to try to look male again. Not much chance of that, though, I realized, looking at my breasts sticking out from the cheap, unstylish dress.

"There, now you're all ready," she told me with a motherly smile. I kept thinking, if my father was still conscious inside this parody of a farm mother, he would be silently screaming by now. At least she hadn't made me wear any makeup.

Ready at last, it now became my job to set the table and start making drinks. Right at six, our guest arrived. I supposed farm families ate dinner—excuse me, supper—early so they could get to bed early and get out and tend the fields and milk the cows early the next day. My mother shooed me into the hallway to greet our guest.

"And you remember Donna Mae here," my new father said, feigning pride in me as I walked into the hall.

Mr. Spencer was nearly my father's age, I realized. He was a pleasant enough looking man, but hardly handsome. His sandy hair was thinning, almost lost against his farm-tanned skin. His eyes were his best feature, sparkling blue in color. He had a slender build, but solid muscles from heavy farm work. He didn't appear to be one of the transparent people. He held a large-boned hand out to me shyly. "Yes, I do remember Donna Mae," he said in a tone of voice that made me want to run for cover.

I bit the bullet and stuck out my own tiny hand, which was immediately

covered by his. "Mr. Spencer," I managed to say, trying not to show the pain of his unintentionally powerful grip.

"Just call me Jess," he said with a pleasant smile.

Dinner was hell. It was obvious my new parents had made it their mission in life to marry me off to Jess Spencer. They kept steering the conversation to my domestic prowess. Maybe the Donna Mae who had existed before I was thrust in that role had such abilities, but I had none. I scarcely knew how to boil water, yet my new father busied himself making remarks like, "If you think this chicken is good, you should see what my little Donna Mae can do with a bird."

Yes, I would have liked to have flipped one at my 'father,' but I wasn't sure what would happen if I incurred his wrath. Something told me the results would not be pleasant.

"Well," Jess drawled, "if she can fry up a chicken better than this, she sure would be a fine cook, 'cause Mrs. Potter, this here chicken is about the finest I ever tasted."

My 'mother' smiled with pride. "I'm glad you like it, Mr. Spencer." She had limited her conversation, deferring to my 'father' most of the time. It was a woman's place. I'm sure that's what she thought, anyway.

The kitchen table was small to begin with, but they had arranged it so I was sitting uncomfortably close to Mr. Spencer. He had made no attempt to disguise his gazes at me, taking me in as if I were the reigning Miss America. It took all my willpower to keep from running from the table as fast as my new legs could carry me.

At last, dessert was finished and coffee drunk. The evening was coming to an end, I thought. I could hardly wait to bid Mr. Spencer good night. It wasn't to happen so quickly, though, I realized with a sinking feeling in my stomach, for my father said, "Lucille, why don't you and I clean up and let these young folks get to know each other a little better."

It was done with such a heavy hand that had I been a casual observer, I might have laughed. But for me, in the sudden role of

Donna Mae Potter, it was no laughing matter. Mr. Spencer was being given an opportunity to examine the merchandise. What would I do if he... if he... I didn't even want to finish that thought.

He ushered me out onto the front porch, where the setting sun had left the sky a brilliant orange. He guided me to a waiting porch swing and sat down beside me.

"Your folks are fine people," he said by way of an opening gambit. That's right. That's how to get to a girl's heart, I thought. Tell her how wonderful her family was. Well, this girl had been a girl for less than a day, and as to her family, they could roast in hell for all I cared.

Of course, I voiced none of this. I merely smiled and mumbled a demure "Thank you."

"Y'know, I lost my folks early," he went on. "Dad, he died when I was just sixteen. Never sick a day in his life, but a tractor turned over on him one day. Mom and me ran the farm after that, but it wore her out. She got sickly and had to be taken care of for the last six years."

Where was he going with all of this?

"After she died last year, running the farm just got to be a full time job. I never had much time to do any courting."

Courting? Is that what this was? But I didn't want to be courted!

"So I was wondering," he began shyly. "Do you suppose we could see each other again? I mean just the two of us. I'd like to get to know you better, Donna Mae."

Only a day before, how would I have answered a question like that? Well, it would have been a question about a business proposal and not a relationship, so I would have said something to the effect of "I'll be happy to consider your proposal." I didn't think that answer would fit here. Should I tell him no? I wanted to, but I wasn't sure what the ramifications of that response would be. I certainly didn't want to lead him on. An affirmative response might have found me crushed in his arms while he babbled about setting a date for the wedding.

"I'll think about it, Mr. Spencer," I said with a bland smile.

“Call me Jess,” he said softly.

“Jess, then.”

He stood up. “Then I’ll take that as reason to call again,” he said formally. “You tell your folks again thanks for dinner. I’ll be calling you real soon.”

That was it. There was no good night kiss, no pawing me on the porch swing. He ambled down the porch steps, got into a new Dodge pickup, and drove away, leaving one relieved new girl in his wake.

My parents were still doing the dishes when I went into the kitchen.

“So is he gonna call again?” my father said hopefully.

“He said he would,” I replied.

He grunted and put down the dishtowel he had been half-heartedly using. “Then I’ll leave this to you two.” With that, he strode off to the living room where I heard the rustle of a newspaper.

With a sigh, I picked up the dishtowel and began to wipe the dishes as my mother washed them. I was able by now to figure out which shelves to place them on.

Mom smiled at me. “He really just wants what’s best for you,” she said, noting how distracted I was.

“By setting me up with someone his own age?”

“Nonsense!” she scoffed. It was odd how I was accepting this person who had once been my father as my new mother. “Your daddy is forty-one. Mr. Spencer is a good ten years younger.”

“That still makes him—what?—thirteen years older than me,” I pointed out.

“You don’t want some young pup,” she argued. “What’s a young pup good for except in bed?”

My face flushed. I didn’t want any pup, young or old. Underneath this farm girl exterior beat the heart of a red-blooded man, and to have my new mother think all I was interested in was somebody my age for

better sex was almost enough to make me run screaming from the room.

“It isn’t that,” I replied honestly as I nearly dropped a dish.

“Of course it is,” she insisted. “I’m not that old, you know. I still remember what it was like to be a young girl like you.”

You only think you do, I thought to myself. When you think you were a young girl, you were already grinding competitors into the dirt while you became one of the wealthiest developers in America. Deep down, do you remember any of that?

“Why, when I was in high school, I had the boys just flocking around me.”

It was so hard to believe that even if she had existed in some form that long ago, the boys would be flocking around her. She looked like Ma Kent for god’s sake.

“Anyhow, Jess Spencer would make you a fine husband. He could provide for you and make you happy if you let him. I saw the way he looked at you at dinner. He’s definitely interested in you. I wouldn’t be surprised to see him pop the question to you on your first date.”

My god! What a terrible thought!

“But what if I don’t... want him?” I managed to ask. “What if I don’t want to get married?”

“All girls want to get married,” she replied, adding, “At least all normal girls.”

Well, I wasn’t exactly a normal girl.

‘Dad’ had gone to bed early, as was apparently his habit. I suppose that was fairly normal on a farm. After all, where else could the expression ‘up with the chickens’ have come from. This gave me some time to spend with ‘mom,’ just talking about inconsequential things—girl talk, if you will. She told me about her own girlhood, growing up the daughter of a tenant farmer in Oklahoma (that is, one where the farmer didn’t actually own the farm, but rather rented it for a

share of the crop). I could detect nothing about her that would indicate that she had any memory of her previous life. Here she was, formerly one of the most powerful real estate barons in the country, reduced to a few hundred acres of Oklahoma farmland, and I would have bet her name wasn't even on the deed.

It was, I supposed, a fitting punishment, although the woman she had become would not have considered it a punishment, I was sure. She was limited to her high school education, had gotten pregnant unexpectedly and subsequently married in her senior year. In fact, she hadn't even graduated. In those days, she had told me, pregnant girls weren't welcome in school. My 'father' had been the only man she had ever known—sexually, that is.

It explained a bit about him, too. As the only son of a farmer, he had hoped to marry well, possibly the daughter of another farmer. Then, two small farms could be merged into one large one. It hadn't happened that way, though, and now he was a bitter man who worked hard but never seemed to really get ahead.

That apparently was where I came in. As his 'daughter,' I was expected to improve the family fortunes by marrying well. Jess Spencer's land bordered on ours, and together, we could have a large farm—run, of course, under the benevolent hand of my father.

I was forced to appreciate the cosmic justice the Judge was capable of dispensing. I had a pretty good idea who he was. In college, I had been forced to read Ovid, so I knew his writings of the gods. The Judge either was a god in the old Roman sense, or he had enough powers from wherever to think of himself as one. I suspected he really was one. Which one? Well, Judge and Jupiter both started with the same two letters. He certainly seemed to have Jovian powers. I wondered if Ovid was an existing town he had co-opted or if he had created it out of whole cloth. Whichever was true, he was probably one of the most powerful beings ever to walk the planet.

And he had a sense of humor, too. That much was clear. After all, he had 'punished' both my father and me in most creative ways. My father had browbeaten every woman he had ever known. I don't know

exactly why. Maybe he had a domineering mother and he was just getting even. I hadn't known my grandmother, so I couldn't say for sure. Or maybe he was just a misogynistic son of a bitch. Whatever the correct answer, he was paying now, I realized as I headed off to bed. He would spend—presumably—the rest of his new life taking guff from a man who would have been a poor man's version of his soul brother in his original life. He would be one of the people he hated most—a woman.

And what of me? Was justice done in my case? I had never hated women, so was it justice for me to become one? Perhaps, I thought, as I pulled a cotton nightie out of a drawer after a futile search for something less feminine, being female was somewhat incidental to my case. What was it that the Judge had said to me? He said that my sentence carried with it a chance for happiness and contentment, if I was smart enough to find it.

Happiness? Contentment? How was I supposed to be happy as some eighteen-year-old freckle-faced farm girl with an Oklahoma twang in her voice and all the fashion sense of a rock? Was that what Jess Spencer was all about? Was he supposed to make me happy? Yeah, right.

I stripped off my dress, really taking the time to look at my new body for the first time. Well, I was a freckle-faced farm girl all right, but not a bad-looking one. My face was smooth and soft, in spite of some obvious time working on the farm in the hot Oklahoma sun. The rest of my skin was more pink, and I had practically no hair on my body, except on my head and a tiny thin patch at my crotch. My breasts were full, although not overly large. I checked my bra. I was a C cup, but not a particularly large one. The breasts did look a little larger, though, on my slender frame. Waist and hips were undeniably feminine, and my legs were about as nice as a girl's pair of legs could be.

Now what was I supposed to do with this body to gain that happiness and contentment the Judge spoke of? Did I have to marry Jess and be a dutiful farm wife, milking cows and raising children? Maybe that was

the Judge's idea of happiness and contentment, but it didn't sound right to me.

But what other choices were available to me? I wondered as I slipped on the nightie and crawled into bed. College was out. I lacked the money, and I was sure that my new father would see no value in that for me. As for work, that was fine, but with no special skills in a small town, there didn't seem much opportunity there. Perhaps the morning would bring answers instead of questions, I thought, as I slowly drifted off to sleep.

"Come on, you lazy girl!" a deep voice barked in the half-light. "There's no call to be sleepin' in. The chickens gotta be fed."

Girl? Chickens? I groaned, surprised to hear the high pitch of my voice. What was going on? I began to awaken slowly, realizing in tiny fragments where I was, and more importantly, who I was. As I lay on my back only semiconscious, I became aware of the weight of my new breasts, the tickle of my long hair, and most insistently, an urgent need to pee. That was the strangest feeling of all. Rather than manifesting itself in a semi-erection of my now absent penis, the feeling seemed to be coming from inside my body. Of course, I realized, where else would it come from? There was nothing sticking out any more.

With a sigh, I got out of bed, feeling the soft nightie swirl about my legs and trundled off to the bathroom. I had had nearly a day to get used to voiding in this fashion, I thought as I squatted on the toilet. Leaning slightly forward to allow for what little aim I could manage. Still, I couldn't get used to the feeling. Somehow, taking a leak wasn't as satisfying any more. With resignation, I wiped myself and began to prepare for a new day as a girl.

I suddenly realized I didn't have the foggiest notion what to do next. I supposed a shower should be the first order of the day. Girls were supposed to smell nice, and I was smelling a little pungent. With a tired sigh, I turned on the water in the shower and let it turn warm

while I stripped out of my nightie. I stepped into the shower, relaxing as the warm water cascaded over my newly softened skin.

Most women I knew preferred the luxury of a bath over the utility of a shower. I might be female now, but I realized in that moment that I was always going to be a shower person. The only problem, I noted was keeping my newly long hair from getting wet and not allowing the water to strike directly on my sensitive nipples.

It felt odd to wash this new body, though. My male body had been hard and angular. This new flesh of mine was soft and gave way when I sponged it off. Also, the curves made it a series of different motions. Reluctantly, I realized this new flesh was much more sensitive than my male flesh. Washing it could almost become a sensual act. Its smooth, delicate feel was akin to lying on silk sheets, smooth and cool to the touch. I found myself closing my eyes and sponging my soft breasts, then reaching for...

A loud bang on the door almost caused me to wet myself. "Girl, are you gonna be in there all day?" My father's growl interrupted my reverie. In shock, I looked down at where my hand had been about to go of its own accord. Embarrassed, I rinsed quickly and got dressed in my farm girl outfit of jeans and plaid shirt. I wasn't sure what else to do to get ready. Thankfully, I had been wearing no makeup when I was changed, so I assumed I needed none now. I again gathered my long hair into a rough ponytail and applied the scrunchie I had used the day before. A look in the mirror told me that I looked about right.

Feeding the chickens was a simple enough chore. There weren't many of them to feed for one thing. This wasn't a chicken farm, so the only birds we had were apparently for our own use, the way suburbanites plant small gardens to satisfy their own needs. I had no idea what the primary crop was. It was probably wheat or corn, but I wasn't sure and didn't want to know. The chicken feed was in a bag on a shelf in the hen house. I took the large tin cup resting at the top of the bag and poured it into the wooden trough in front of the chicken's roost. Then, I threw some more in the small exercise yard in front of the hen house. Several birds rushed over and began pecking

at once. The chore done, I walked back to the house.

“Well, where are the eggs?” my mother asked, looking over her shoulder from the frying pan filled with sizzling bacon.

“Eggs?”

She sighed, “Honestly, Donna Mae, you can’t seem to keep your mind on anything these days. You’re not going to make much of a farm wife if you can’t keep your head on straight.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled, backing out of the house and heading back to the hen house.

I took a basket off the shelf and filled it with eggs. At least I had performed that chore before, so I knew what I was supposed to be doing. I hurried them back to my mother and began the task of setting the table and making drinks without being asked.

Breakfast was eaten in relative silence. My new father wolfed down a full plate of bacon and eggs, washed down with cold milk and coffee. From the look of him, he had already been working for some time and was getting ready to work again. I was beginning to realize that life on a farm was not as idyllic as I had once imagined. Like most city boys, I had imagined farming to be more technologically oriented as we neared the twenty-first century. No such luck—at least on the Potter farm. Farming here was hard work. I could almost understand why he seemed to resent me. If I had been a son instead of a daughter, I would have been more helpful to him in running the farm. As it was, I was a weak girl, fit only for cooking and light farm duties, and of course, for being married off to a farmer.

I certainly wished I was his son instead of his daughter. I had no interest in being a girl. Maybe I could see the Judge and ask him to change me again. Being the son of... gee, I suddenly realized I didn’t even know his first name... But being Farmer Potter’s son instead of his daughter would be better for everyone. My ‘father’ would have someone to help him on the farm, and I would have my male identity back again. It wouldn’t be the same as being scion of the God of Real Estate, but it would be better than wearing dresses and having

periods—or worse yet—missing periods.

My father looked at his watch. “Eight o’clock,” he pronounced. “Time to go to work.”

“Get the dishes, dear,” my mother told me sweetly.

As I rose to do my next chore, the phone rang. My mother answered, listening for a moment before handing the phone to me. “It sounds like Charlene,” she told me.

Charlene was gushing pure excitement. “She called me!”

“Who called you?” I asked.

“Vera March.” When I said nothing, she explained. “You know, from March’s Department Store. They want to interview me for a sales job.”

“That’s great,” I replied, trying to sound cheery. When we had filled out the applications, I had been ambivalent about the idea of being a sales clerk in a small town department store. Sure, it sounded better than being a farm girl, but it was still a long fall from the life I was accustomed to. Now, though, I found myself more than a little envious. Charlene would be off the farm, building a modest career. Me? I would be stuck on the farm, trying desperately to avoid the clumsy advances of Jess Spencer.

“Listen, have you heard from them?” she asked.

“Not a word,” I admitted, chagrined. I guess freckle-faced farm girls weren’t in high demand, even at small town department stores.

“Well, I’m going in at ten for an interview. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

I found myself actually depressed as I hung up the phone. Here I was, mentally an MBA from the Harvard Business School, and yet I couldn’t get a job clerking in a store. Try as I might to stop them, there were actually a few of my tears mixed into the soapy dishwater that morning.

Then, at eight thirty, my life changed.

The phone rang again. "It's for you again," my mother said, exasperated at becoming my answering service.

It was probably Charlene again, I thought, grabbing the phone. I really didn't want to talk to her again, so I was probably a little gruff when I mumbled, "Yes?"

"Donna Mae?" I recognized the voice. There was only one like it in the world, I was sure. It was Vera March.

"Uh... yes," I replied, chagrined.

"I've been reviewing your application," she said smoothly. "I think you have some potential. I'd like to discuss your goals with you. Is there a time we could meet this morning?"

"Uh..." I stammered, trying to think of a reply. I had no car, and I was pretty sure I wouldn't be given the use of the family truck when there were plenty of chores to be done. I would have to catch a ride with Charlene. What time was her interview? Ten? "Would ten thirty do?"

"That would be fine, dear," she said cheerfully. "I'll see you then."

As she hung up, I realized how important the interview might be to my future.

"Oh god!" I cried out.

My 'mother' put her arm around me. "What's wrong, dear?"

"I have a job interview," I told her, so flustered, I didn't know which way to turn. "I need to call Charlene to get a ride. I need to get changed."

'Mother' frowned. "A job interview?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "Charlene and I applied at March's. Vera March wants to see me at ten thirty."

"I'm not too sure I like that woman," my mother said in measured tones. "Besides, we need you here on the farm."

"But I can't stay here on the farm forever," I told her as I dialled Charlene. There it was again—that ability to act as Donna Mae when I

let my subconscious take over. I had dialled her number without having the slightest notion what it was. "Charlene... I got an interview, too! Can you pick me up? Nine thirty? Great!"

"I know you can't stay here forever, dear," mother agreed, "but if you and that nice Mr. Spencer were to get married, we could run the farms together."

The cat was out of the bag. The 'M' word had been used for the first time. Apparently my new parents had it all figured out. I was to marry Jess Spencer whether I wanted to or not. What a nice, simple arrangement! The two farms were right next to each other. We could run them as one. I wondered if 'that nice Mr. Spencer' had any idea that the farms would have to be run according to my father's wishes and not his own. I was to be used like some medieval princess, married off to the neighboring baron for an alliance.

Or like Martin R. Brubaker Junior being forced to marry Lucinda Watson, I thought grimly. Yes, I had been willing to do that. I felt I had no choice. My father had decreed it for the good of the company, and I had agreed to it. Did I love Lucinda Watson? Of course I didn't. She was slightly overweight, had a strident voice, and looked down her nose at everyone who hadn't appeared in the society pages in the last three months. Yet I had been willing to marry her.

Was it any worse to be asked to marry Jess Spencer? Jess was a nice guy, pleasant looking if not handsome. He would make a good husband and a good father. Yet I just wasn't attracted to him any more than I had been attracted to Lucinda Watson. Why should that make such a difference to me now? Oh, sure, I was now a girl, and I had to admit that the thought of sex as a girl wasn't the most pleasant thought I had ever experienced. As Martin, I could have forced myself to go to a loveless bed with Lucinda, have sex with her, and then go on with my life, maybe with a mistress on the side. But as Donna Mae, could I slide beneath the covers with a man I didn't love? Was it that different as a woman?

"I just don't want you to go," my mother said suddenly, breaking my train of thought.

“But I’ve already said I would,” I argued.

She folded her arms. “Then I forbid it.”

“Mother, I’m eighteen,” I said, bluffing. I wasn’t sure if I was eighteen or not. “I’m an adult. I’m going in for that interview.”

She was obviously shocked at my resistance. “Then wait until your father finds out about this,” she called to me as I hurried to my room.

I suddenly realized there was sometimes truth to the old woman’s lament of “I haven’t got a thing to wear.” There was nothing in my somewhat Spartan closet which would look right for the interview with Vera March. I finally decided upon a drab brown suit and plain white blouse, as well as a pair of brown flats. I realized it wasn’t a very stylish outfit, but the Potters weren’t a very stylish family. Besides, even if I had found nylons and heels, I wasn’t sure I could handle them. I would just have to let my charming personality do the work for me. I wished I could ditch the Oklahoma twang in my voice, but realized everyone else had it, too, so it wasn’t out of place.

There were no goodbyes from my mother as I hurried out to join Charlene. Mother sat in the living room, pretending to be engrossed in the morning paper as I hurried out the door.

Charlene put me to shame. She wore a linen suit, peach colored, with a silky white blouse. She had stylish gold jewelry and attractive makeup. Her two-inch heels and nylons gave her legs a very sophisticated look. It was all enough to make me cringe. I looked like something that had just wandered in out of the depths of the Ozarks. Charlene noticed my alarm. “Oh, don’t worry, Donna Mae. You look just fine.”

Sure I did. I looked like a man pretending to be a woman. I had no makeup, no heels, no nylons, and a suit the color of cow shit. I had about as much chance of impressing Vera March as I did of winning a Miss America pageant.

We got to March’s with a few minutes to spare. Charlene led the way confidently while I lagged behind, looking over the store to see if there

was any role I could take on there. I saw a rather dumpy woman—not one of the transparent people—with a mop cleaning up a mess made by a spilled coffee. Maybe I could do that, I thought. Maybe I was qualified to be a custodian.

The next sensation I felt was running into an immovable object. Tottering and nearly falling, I felt a strong arm pull me back to my feet. I was suddenly looking into the most gorgeous pair of blue eyes I had ever seen. Then, shocked, I realized they were the eyes of a young man.

“Are you all right?” he asked releasing me.

Dumbly, I nodded. I had been a man only a day before, yet I found myself practically awestruck gazing into the eyes of this man. He was not terribly tall—only about six feet, although that towered over my new five-five height. He had brown hair and the aforementioned blue eyes, and strong, handsome features.

“Okay,” he said softly, turning back to the counter of sport shirts he had been looking at when I had bumped into him.

That was it. There had been nothing about me to cause him to give me a second look. I was just some clumsy farm girl who had run into him. I was on my own again.

“Hurry up, Donna Mae,” Charlene called to me. As if in a trance, I followed her to the office.

I waited nervously outside Vera March’s office as Charlene went in for her interview. Here was my best chance to get away from the farm and I had blown it. I almost envied my ‘mother.’ She didn’t realize how far she had fallen—from real estate baron to farm wife. I knew, though. Oh, did I know.

At last, the door opened. Charlene and Vera March were both smiling happily.

“Then you’ll start at nine o’clock tomorrow at the cosmetics counter,” Vera was saying. “I think you’ll do a marvellous job for us. I’m so happy to have you on board.”

I was happy for Charlene, but in the center of my being, I was also hopelessly jealous. She had done it! She was going to move into town and be somebody, even if it was as a clerk at the cosmetics counter. I wouldn't even be able to do that.

"Well, it looks as if you're next," she said to me. Today, she wore a double-breasted silk suit in a tasteful plum color with dark hose and matching shoes. Of course, she could have been wearing a gunny sack and would have still looked incredible. I felt so terribly inadequate that it was all I could do to keep from running for the exit.

When I was seated in her office, she looked over the application I had filled out the day before. Then, she asked me a most unexpected question. "Well, are you settling into being Donna Mae? I'm sure it's quite a change for you."

I nearly fell out of the chair. "You... you know who I was?"

"Oh, yes," she laughed.

"Are you... one of them?" I asked.

"One of what?" she asked patiently.

"A... god?"

Just for a moment, she lost her composure. "You know who we are?"

"I think I do," I answered carefully. "I read a lot of Ovid in college. Since he was Roman, I'm assuming this has something to do with Roman gods."

"That's something of a leap of logic," she commented with a smile.

I shrugged. "Maybe. But it makes sense. To do what the Judge did to me and my father would take magical powers. If you had asked me a couple of days ago if magic existed, I would have said no, but now, it's obvious it does. I didn't become a girl by any non-magical power."

She looked at me carefully. "Perhaps the Judge was right about you. There's more to you than I would have first imagined. Let's see how much there really is to you. Who is the Judge?"

“Jupiter,” I said quickly. I wasn’t entirely sure of my answer, but it seemed to make sense.

“And who am I?”

If Judge and Jupiter had the same first two letters, what would match Vera or March? Mars? Mars was male—it couldn’t be that. V... e...

“Venus!” I said confidently.

She shook her head. “I don’t think anyone else has ever put that together as quickly as you. The disorientation of a new identity keeps most people off balance for some time.” She looked at me quietly for moment. “Do you know what I had planned to do with you this morning?”

“No,” I said honestly.

“I had planned to interview you and turn you down,” she explained.

“When I first heard about you and your father, I decided it would be a fitting life for you two to be stuck out there as simple farm wives for the rest of your lives. Now, I’m not so sure. There is more to you than I would have imagined. You might make an interesting project after all.”

“Project?”

“There is more to Ovid than you could ever imagine,” she told me. “It is populated by gods such as the Judge and me, people like you who remember who they were, and people like your father who don’t remember. Of course, most of the population we call ‘shades.’ They are not entirely real, but are needed for our little town to work. People like you are our true projects. More, I cannot say, but I am offering you a job.”

My heart skipped. “Thank you!”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she said. “I see very difficult times ahead for you. First, I don’t hire uncultured farm girls for my lingerie department.”

Lingerie?

“You will have to learn to fit in as a woman,” she told me. “You start

tomorrow at nine.”

“What should I wear?” I asked, realizing I should probably be asking salary questions, but somehow, this seemed more important.

“It doesn’t really matter,” she said. “We’ll be changing your outfit here. I think you’re in for an interesting day tomorrow, Donna.”

I couldn’t believe my good fortune as I left Vera’s office.

Charlene read the look on my face. “You, too?” she practically yelled. With only a grin and a nod, I answered her question. She hugged me so tightly I thought my new breasts would be squashed flat against hers. “That’s terrific!”

We talked together on the drive back like two schoolgirls. Then, I realized with a little private smile that that was exactly what we were. I wondered who Charlene had been before she was transformed. It was difficult to imagine that she had ever been anyone other than this cheery redhead. Had she been male like me? It was certainly possible, but she seemed to have no memories of anything but her life in Ovid. I was actually happy with that. It forced me to conform to my new life, and the sooner I conformed, the more I would be able to control who I had become.

“See you at graduation tonight!” Charlene called out to me as she spun out of our driveway, spraying gravel. I had forgotten all about graduation. It was a little hard for me to see it as a significant event in my life when I had never even attended the school. I wasn’t even sure what time the ceremony would be.

My new mother knew, though. “It’s about time you got home,” she grumped. It was only eleven thirty. I didn’t know what she was so upset about. “Help me with these mashed potatoes and I’ll get the rest. It’s going to be a busy afternoon if we’re going to get you in for graduation at five.”

“Mom,” I said happily as I did my best to mash the potatoes, “I got the job.”

She shook her head. “Your father isn’t going to like that.”

“But I’m an adult... now,” I argued. “I need to make my own way.” Translate that as I need to get off this hellish farm as quickly as my newly-shaved legs can carry me.

“We’ve gone all over that,” she said. “I just hope you’re ready to take the consequences.”

Consequences? What consequences?

Before I could ask, my new father opened the door. “I don’t have much time to eat,” he announced. “There’s a problem down in the south field. Looks like it could be blight.”

That didn’t sound good, and it had put him in a foul mood. I resolved to not mention the new job to him just yet. I hoped my mother had the good sense to remain silent as well. He sat down without ceremony and gulped down a glass of iced tea while wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. Silently, my mother placed a pair of pork chops and a mountain of mashed potatoes in front of him. We all ate in silence.

“What time’s graduation?” he finally asked, wolfing down the last of his food.

“We need to get Donna Mae in for rehearsal at five,” mother told him. “You and me should be there at six thirty.”

He shook his head. “Can’t make it by then. Too much to do. You take her.”

Although I hadn’t actually attended the high school in Ovid, I found myself flushing in anger. Here was a man who was supposed to be my own father, and yet he couldn’t be bothered to attend my graduation. Of course, when I thought about it, my real father hadn’t attended mine. He had been closing a multi-million dollar land deal in New Zealand at the time. I suspected, though, that my new father chose not to go because it simply wasn’t an important event. Education obviously wasn’t very important to him, and the education of a girl ranked particularly low on his scale.

Mother actually frowned. “But it’s her graduation.”

Good for you, mom! You couldn't be bothered when you were my dad, but now that you had a sudden helping of maternal instinct, you were right there to help your little... girl.

My father frowned back. "Damn it, woman, I told you I was too busy. Now don't make me tell you again!"

He made no motion to physically strike her, but she flinched nonetheless. It was like a trip back in time when my real father had similarly treated my real mother to verbal abuse. The Judge's justice could be quite poetic, I was beginning to realize.

"All right," she sighed, giving way to his unquestioned authority.

"Donna Mae, you go start the wash. I'll clean up down here."

"Yes, ma'am," I replied, anxious to be out of the room as quickly as possible.

He wasn't a violent man, I realized as I gathered the washing as best I could. Rather, he was a cruel man. Yet I was certain if someone had confronted him with that fact, he would have denied it. He would contend that he was just being sensible. I could only imagine what his 'sensible' reaction to my new job would be. He wouldn't strike me—I was pretty sure of that. But he would forbid me to work at March's—I was equally sure of that. I had to keep my new job a secret until I had actually begun work. Otherwise, he would forbid me, and my mother would not be able to help. I only hoped she didn't say anything to him.

She didn't. She told me so as we made our way into town for graduation. "No telling what the man would have done if I'd told him," she muttered to me as we drove past the first buildings of Ovid. "He's riled enough at you as it is."

"At me?" I asked innocently, trying not to feel like a fool in my gold and black graduation gown.

She nodded, looking solemn in her dark blue suit which I suspected was normally reserved for church. I didn't know much about women's fashions, but it looked somewhat unstylish. "I want you to go into that, that Mrs. March tomorrow and tell her you don't want the job. Better

yet, you can call her.”

“I’m not going to do that,” I replied stubbornly. If I was to make my own way, I had to have that job—no matter what.

“Then it’ll be on your head,” she said.

She dropped me off in front of the high school stadium. I gathered my robe and mortarboard, thankful as I got out of the truck that I had opted for a comfortable cotton blouse, shorts, and sandals to wear under the robe. It was going to be a warm evening. The sight that awaited me was the strangest I had seen yet in Ovid. It was strange for its normalcy, for students—some real but most transparent—gathered in little groups laughing and talking as if nothing was wrong. I counted—what?—twenty or so ‘real’ people, including Charlene and myself. No one seemed to notice the strangeness of the scene, or if they did, they kept it to themselves.

“Well, here we are!” Charlene said happily as she gave me a hug.

“Come on, let’s talk to Alice.”

Alice was a young girl, dark skin and black hair hinting of Indian heritage, who was talking to a young boy of similar blood near the edge of the crowd. Both she and the boy were—what was the expression Vera had used?—shades. Yet as we approached, I realized they appeared perfectly normal in their actions. Alice happily hugged Charlene, then me, and I was surprised to realize that shades were completely solid.

“This is so cool!” Alice laughed. “Charlene told me you guys would be working at March’s. Then we’ll still get to see each other while Charlie and I are at Capta.”

I had no idea what Capta was, but I wasn’t about to ask. The four of us walked in to the rehearsal together.

“Say, Donna Mae,” the boy, Charlie asked as we waited to be arranged for the ceremony. “Are you going with anyone right now?”

Only Mr. Spencer, I thought to myself grimly. I hesitantly answered, “No... not right now.”

“Well, I was talking to Danny Grady yesterday. He said you were pretty cute for a farm girl.”

Charlene and Alice snickered.

“So he doesn’t think Alice and I are cute—for farm girls?” Charlene asked sweetly.

“Nope,” he responded. “I almost decked him for you. What an ass!”

Pretty cute for a farm girl, eh? I thought as we were sorted into our proper chairs. I had gone to an expensive private high school. There weren’t any farm kids there. If they had been, they would have had very rich parents, just like the rest of my fellow students. I had never realized before that in small towns, there were farm kids and town kids. They were reasonably civil to each other, but they moved in different circles. I had been turned into a farm kid. That apparently made me some sort of yokel in the eyes of many of the townies. Well, so be it.

It did make one thing harder, though. I had been thinking that I would move to town as quickly as I could, assuming that I had a high school ‘friend’ I could room with. If my close ‘friends’ were all farm kids, my options for moving to town might be more limited.

The ceremony went off without any problems. I tried to act just like all the other kids as I marched up to receive my diploma from a line of people I assumed were school dignitaries and administrators. They each smiled, called me by name, and warmly shook my hand as they congratulated me. I realized they all knew me and meant their congratulations. I simply mumbled my thanks and moved on back to my seat.

“Time to party now,” Charlene announced as the ceremony ended. Alice, Charlie, and several others agreed. “Come on, Donna Mae.”

“Thanks, but I can’t,” I replied, seeing my mother waiting patiently for me.

Charlene groaned, “Oh, come on! We only graduate once. We’re all going down to the lake for a party.”

“We’ve got to go to work tomorrow,” I explained. “I need you to pick me up. We have to be there by nine.”

“No problem,” she laughed, giving me a hug. “I’ll pick you up. Now let’s party.”

I hugged her back. “I can’t. I’m sorry.”

She smiled. “Party pooper.”

I smiled back. “See you tomorrow.”

When we got home, my father was already in bed, for which I was thankful. That meant I didn’t have to tell him about my new job, and mother couldn’t either.

In bed at last, I had a few quiet moments to reflect on my first full day as a girl. I thought it had gone fairly well. I had a job, had graduated from high school, and made a couple of new friends. It had been a real eye-opener to find that there was a rift between town kids and farm kids. All evening, I had seen evidence that the girls from town considered themselves to be much more sophisticated than their country cousins. I smiled, thinking what girls their age I knew back in New York would think of their ‘sophistication.’ For that matter, I wondered what they would think if they knew that through my father, I had met a number of their TV and movie idols. What would they think of their ‘farm girl’ if they knew I had met Matt Dillon, for example?

Come to think of it, I still had Matt’s private phone number twirling around in my head someplace. He and I had met at a party in LA that had ended up as a private party back at his place with a few friends—mostly female. Maybe I’d give him a call, I thought smiling at what that would be like. I mean, it would be interesting to meet him this way, wouldn’t it? What would we do? I could imagine having a drink with him now, his arm slipping around m... wait a minute!

I shot bolt upright in bed. With a shock, I could feel a strange tingling in places I had been trying to ignore. I hadn’t planned on thinking of Matt that way. I had just been thinking about what every girl in Ovid would say if they knew that I knew him. Why had I suddenly started

thinking of him... that way? There was more at work with my transformation than I had realized before. Maybe my mind wasn't so unaffected after all. I would have to be careful, I realized, as I drifted off to sleep.

I awoke the next morning with no prodding. My father was still in the shower, and I could already smell bacon frying in the kitchen. I hurried into the kitchen in a white cotton robe. I was afraid my mother had actually said something about the job to my father. Mother was setting the table when I entered the kitchen.

"Have you told him?" I asked, nervous with anticipation.

She shook her head. "No. He woke up in a bad mood. I told him you were going to be helping Charlene today, so he doesn't know."

I breathed a sigh of relief. If his schedule held true, he would be out in the field most of the day. He wouldn't notice when I left or when I returned. It wasn't going to be a satisfactory long term solution, but once I had actually started the job and learned my way around Ovid, it would be harder for him to stop me.

Thankfully, I had no fear of physical abuse. He wasn't a hitter for all his other faults. He was just a man with no respect for the worth of women. He probably never thought to hit a woman—not because he felt it was wrong—because women weren't worth the trouble. Of course, that didn't mean he would never hit a woman. It just meant he hadn't yet.

I dressed quickly if not well. Vera had said it didn't matter what I wore since she would take care of that when I got to work. I assumed there was some sort of uniform I was to wear, although I had noticed no uniforms in the store before. Taking her at her word, I dressed in a pair of tan slacks and a white polo shirt and flat sandals. With my hair still tied in the ever-present ponytail, I didn't think I looked too bad. I certainly didn't look like a boy, for my curves were obviously feminine, but I looked boyish. I smiled at myself. It was the look I had hoped for. I ate quickly and rushed out to meet Charlene as soon as she pulled up.

Charlene looked as if she were dressed for a party. Her hair was stylishly curled and her makeup gave her a somewhat sophisticated appearance. She wore a Kelly green dress that made her red hair look like living flames as it curled over her shoulders. Matching two-inch heels and tan hose displayed long, lovely legs, and gold earrings and jewelry gave an almost regal air to her appearance. She looked like an Irish princess. If I had still been male, I would have been instantly in love.

“Wow!” I said, almost without meaning to as I got in the car. “Look at you.”

She smiled. “I’m glad you like it. I’m starting out in dresses today. You’re awfully casual, though. Where has she got you starting?”

“Lingerie,” I replied with an involuntary blush.

She looked at me quizzically as we pulled away from the house.

“Lingerie? Dressed like that?”

“What’s wrong with this?” I asked, embarrassed in spite of myself.

“Well,” she explained, “it might be a suitable look for sportswear or something, but it’s a little casual for lingerie.”

“Vera said it didn’t matter,” I told her. “She said something about my changing when I got there.”

“Oh.”

We didn’t speak of it again while driving in, but I did start to feel a little uncomfortable. Here was Charlene, all dressed up, and here I was, still the country bumpkin. Had I misunderstood Vera’s instructions to me? Maybe she would take one look at me and decide she had made a mistake in hiring me. My stomach churned. If that happened, I would be back to square one.

March’s opened at nine thirty during the week and it was—what?—Wednesday. It was odd, but without my Daytimer, I had lost all sense of time. Had it only been two days since I had been transformed? It seemed as if it were a lifetime ago. We reported in at Vera’s office at five until nine.

Vera was dressed in a pastel green suit with a soft silk blouse. She had a cheerful smile on her face as she inspected Charlene. “Just right,” she said. “Go ahead and report to Cosmetics on the second floor. Ms. Jensen will get you started.”

As Charlene walked out of the office with a happy smile, Vera’s attention was turned to me. She didn’t exactly frown, but there was a look of concern bordering on pity when she inspected me.

“Well, Donna Mae, I think we’ll have our work cut out for us, don’t you?”

I didn’t answer, unsure of what to say.

She motioned to a chair. “Sit down for a moment.”

Silently, I sat.

She folded her hands and leaned forward with catlike grace. “Donna, if we are going to succeed in making a silk purse out of a sow’s ear...”

Is that what I was? A sow’s ear?

“...then we will have to work hard at it. Tell me, what do you think about being a woman?”

A woman? Is that what I was? Believe it or not, I hadn’t really thought of myself as one. I mean, I knew I was female. That was obvious every time I had to pee, or every time I felt the sway of my new breasts or heard the soft soprano voice I now owned. But what did it mean to be a woman?

“I’m not sure,” I replied honestly, realizing it for the first time.

“Then let me explain it to you,” she said kindly. “Being a woman is more difficult than being a man. Men can do whatever they want without fear of becoming an object. Do you understand that?”

“I... No, I guess I don’t.”

“When you were a man, you could be dressed in a thousand-dollar suit and it might define what sort of a man you were—wealthy, professional, cultured—but it wouldn’t define you as an object. You

were still a man. You were important because you were a man, whether you wore the thousand-dollar suit or the work shirt and jeans your new father wears. But when you are a woman, you must constantly assert that importance. It's not automatically granted to you. In fact, how you dress and conduct yourself may detract from your importance. Dress correctly or incorrectly and a man is still a man. When a woman dresses, she may become a twat or a cunt if she's not careful. Do you see what I mean?"

"But a man can be a dick," I argued.

She nodded. "Yes, but it doesn't mean the same thing. When you call a man a dick, it's as if you were calling him a moron. You aren't reducing him to an object—a sexual one in particular. But when a woman is reduced to a cunt, she becomes an object."

"Then why was this done to me?" I asked. "Why was I changed into a woman?"

"You would have to ask the Judge for a specific answer," she told me, "and I doubt if he would give it to you. I can speculate, though. My guess is that he saw in you qualities which would be strengthened if you were to be given the opportunity—and that is what it is—to be a woman."

"What qualities? I'm not attracted to men—or at least I wasn't before. I've never been anxious to dress in women's clothing. I was happy being who I was."

"Were you?"

"Of course," I replied, although I had to admit, without much conviction. Had I been happy being Martin Brubaker Junior? Sure, I was wealthy, or at least, my father was, but I had no authority over anything, including my own life.

"You see it, don't you, Donna?" she said softly. "Your life was empty. You had no true identity. You were forced to go through your life being what your father expected you to be—him. Like him, you would have followed your father down a path that would lead to a career whose

only satisfaction was to participate in the destruction of others. That's what your father was all about, wasn't he?"

It was, of course. He had followed his own father into the real estate business. I didn't remember much about my grandfather—he had died when I was ten. But I never remembered him hugging me or smiling at me. I remember him being formal, gruff, and distant, like my own father. He was like the robber barons, playing the game of real estate to win, and he had taught my father well.

"It was too late for your father," she went on. "Too many years of bitterness and a loveless marriage left him without enough potential to be offered another chance. You would have been just like him before you knew it."

"I would never have been like him!" I protested, surprised at my own vehemence.

She shook her head sadly. "Yes, you would. Already, your life was more empty than that of our own shades. They at least have in many cases the appearance of a happy life, but they are empty. They live lives that are dictated for them, as did you. Now, though, all of that must change."

Her voice was becoming calm and soothing. I felt myself almost drifting into a quiet reverie. Thoughts of my former life seemed to drift away with a mental tide, replaced by a yearning I couldn't begin to understand. Oh, I still remembered my former life. It was just it seemed so insignificant. What was the old quote in the Bible about gaining the world while losing your immortal soul? For me, just the opposite seemed to be happening.

While I was still in this reverie, listening not hearing the words that Vera spoke to me, but still absorbing their meaning, I suddenly rose to my feet. Vera smiled at me and led me into another world.

"Well, what do you think?"

It had taken nearly three hours, but a new person stood in Vera's office, gazing unbelievably into a full-length mirror. I wasn't sure what

to think. The person who looked back at me from the mirror was almost more of a stranger than the person who looked back at me right after my transformation.

First, Vera had taken me to the beauty shop in the store. There, as I relaxed in what had to be a magical trance, my mousy brown hair was transformed. First, it was washed, then cut, curled and set in a style that was full and loose, but kept its shape whenever I turned my head. In the mirror, I saw that the rinse they had used had given it an almost reddish highlight.

Next, Vera had me put on a bra and panties which were silky to the feel and trimmed in scalloped lace. I was surprised at how good they felt against my skin, unlike the cotton bra and panties I had used before. She showed me how to put on panty hose, having selected a very sheer pair in a smoky shade. Next came a conservative but stylish gray dress with trim in a deeper shade of gray. It was nothing like the dress I had worn to dinner my first night as a girl. It seemed custom tailored to my new shape, with the skirt coming well above the knee and the tailored top giving just a glimpse of my new cleavage without being unduly provocative. As I was admiring myself in the mirror, Vera held up a two inch pair of heels in black leather.

I shook my head. "Oh, no. I can't wear heels. I don't know how to walk in them."

She smiled. "Surely you must know you can. There's nothing any other girl can do that you can't." Reluctantly, I took the shoes from her and slipped them on. Then, I took my first steps, wobbling unsteadily.

"Oh, Donna," Vera sighed. "You're trying too hard. Just relax. Relax and walk to me."

Her voice was once more mildly hypnotic, and I found that I could suddenly walk in the heels as if I had worn them all my life. I felt the odd shift and sway of my rear as I walked, realizing for the first time in this form how provocative my walk must look. I turned back to the mirror and watched myself as I glided with ease and grace across the office floor. I turned naturally and smiled at Vera.

She smiled back. "Now, for the finishing touches."

The first finishing touch was jewelry. Before I knew it, my ears had been pierced and I wore small delicate gold hoops on my ears. A small gold necklace and matching bracelets for my right wrist were next, followed by a small feminine watch, also in gold.

I suddenly had a terrible thought as I admired the watch. "Oh, Vera, all of this is so expensive. I don't have any money."

"Most of it, we'll take over time from your paycheck. You won't miss it," she assured me. "As to the watch, though, consider that my gift to you."

I smiled.

Last was a trip to the cosmetics counter. In some ways, my introduction to the world of cosmetics was the oddest part of my transformation. I had to learn about foundations (which I had previously thought of only as what is at the bottom of a building). Then there were blushes, eye shadow, mascara, eyebrow pencils, nail polish, and eyeliners. Had I left anything out? Oh, of course—lipstick. How did women ever get used to the odd, greasy feeling on their lips, impregnated with a perfume that changed both my sense of smell and taste?

Back in Vera's office again in front of the mirror, I now knew, though, how Cinderella must have felt when her fairy godmother was finished with her. I don't know that I was ready to try out for the Miss Oklahoma contest, but I had been transformed into a very, very attractive woman. Slowly, I approached the mirror, seeing for myself the gentle sway of my hips and the graceful sweep of my legs. Looking down at my fingers, I saw frosted pink color on newly shaped but not particularly long nails. Tossing my head, I felt the gentle wave of my styled hair, moving with the grace of wheat in the soft summer breeze.

Turning to Vera, I said, "You've enhanced me with your magic, haven't you?"

"No, dear," she laughed merrily. "What you see is all you. I'll admit, I

gave your movements a little boost at first, like training wheels on a bike, but that wore off an hour ago. You're now the Donna Potter who will represent March's."

"Not Donna Mae Potter?" I asked.

In response, she pinned a gold name tag with the March's logo on it. Beneath it was the simple word 'Donna.'

"I think Donna Mae sounds a bit farmish, don't you?" she said.

I smiled and nodded.

I felt like an actor—or rather actress—ready to deliver her first lines before an audience as I walked into the lingerie department with Vera. A sign on the wall said 'Intimate Apparel' while displays of women posing in bras and nightgowns made the place look vaguely like the pages of a Victoria's Secret catalogue. As a man, I had never been able to really look at such a department. If I had, I would have risked being accused of voyeurism or cross-dressing. Now though, this was my temple, and I was one of the Vestal Virgins responsible for its success. An appropriate analogy, I thought, considering my employer.

There was no manager for the department *per se*. Instead, I reported to Nora Garcia, a very nice woman, about forty, with a pleasant smile and an honest desire to help young sales associates like me. She was also a shade—the first one I was to have an opportunity to get to know well. Within fifteen minutes, I was thinking of her as a real person. I wondered where the shades came from. Except for the little transparency problem, she seemed as real as me. Once she taught me the fundamentals, she left the department for Accessories, which was her main responsibility.

The noon hour was a busy time in the store, so most of us had lunch hours after one. I found myself getting a little hollow as noon approached. It was probably just as well, I told myself. Farm food could get to be habit forming, and it seemed as if it was always heavy and filled with calories. I resolved to start eating salad for lunch.

Customer traffic started to get heavy around eleven, as people took

early lunch hours. It was a difficult time for me, for I was expected to recognize some of the customers. After all, Ovid was a small town. Also, I was expected to know a little about the products I sold, partially from experience. Of course, since I had only been wearing bras and panties for a couple of days, I was hardly an expert. Still, I managed, and soon was talking about cup fit and giggling with the customers as we speculated on what their husbands would think of them in the sexy teddies on one of the racks.

Just a little after noon, two girls about my age came into the department. They both called out to me by name, but of course, I had no idea who they were. One was a very well endowed blonde who the other one called Myra. In my previous life, I would have probably left a trail of saliva down on the floor as I followed her around. She was very well endowed, which her pink knit blouse did nothing to hide, and her legs, covered only by the shortest of white skirts, were nothing short of perfect. She had on open toed sandals with a small heel and wore no stockings. To be honest, she didn't need them. I was about to write her off as a bimbo until she began to speak.

"Look at this, Sam," she called to the other girl, holding a particularly sexy nightie up to herself. She was teasing her friend. "Do you think it's me?" she said in an obvious parody of the bimbo I had assumed her to be.

Her friend, a very attractive girl in her own right, laughed tossing her head back as auburn hair bobbed in amusement. "Oh, of course," she said, holding up a hot number over her own body, "and how about this for me?"

Both girls laughed, and I found myself smiling.

Then, Sam looked at me, as if really seeing me for the first time. "Myra, could I have a minute with Donna?"

"Sure," Myra agreed. "I'll be over looking at swim suits."

When she was gone, Sam turned to face me. She was dressed in a peach T-top and denim cutoffs, and she made them look good. She grinned. "You remember who you were, don't you?"

My mouth fell open. I hadn't suspected. "Are you a go-g—" I couldn't seem to get the word out.

"Like the Judge?" she said in a low voice. "No, I'm just like you."

"Then how did you know I was... someone else?" I asked carefully, not wanting to choke on the words again.

"All newcomers seem to have a look about them," she explained.

"When you've been here as long as I have, you start to recognize that look. Now, don't get all flustered. Most people would never notice. Even some of the ones who do notice wouldn't guess that you used to be male."

My face must have turned fire engine red from the feeling of heat in my cheeks. I felt like I was in drag.

Sam put a hand on my arm. "Don't get embarrassed. I used to be a guy, too. In fact, I was even a college football player. Can't you see me out on the field now?" she laughed.

I actually felt relieved by then. Although Vera had told me there were others like me who remembered who they had been, this was my first experience talking with one. "No more than I can see myself in a business suit," I replied with a little laugh of my own. "I assume your friend doesn't know?"

"Myra? Oh, she knows. I'll let her tell you her story some other time. Some people are sort of private about who they used to be, but Myra will tell you. It's just that the rules don't allow more than two of us to discuss this together."

"Rules?"

"Oh, you'll learn all about the rules," Sam told me. She got a slip of paper from the counter and wrote something down. When she handed it to me, I saw it was her full name—Samantha Wallace—and her phone number. "Give me a call some time and we'll discuss all this. Sometimes it helps to have someone explain the ropes to you. I'd do it now, but Myra and I are both working over at Rusty's Burger Barn this afternoon. You know, summer jobs. Bye."

“Wait!” I called. She turned. “Why is all this happening?”

She gave me a wistful smile. “We’ve all been asking ourselves that question. None of us knows. And the... ones who know aren’t telling.”

I was still pondering that as I was leaving the store for lunch. Why would the Roman gods go to all the trouble of creating a small town in Oklahoma? I suppose we all flattered ourselves that there was some cosmic purpose to it. In fact, maybe we were just the god’s version of an ant farm. They’d watch us closely every day as we built our little society, and we’d chug happily along, not knowing that it was all just a game.

“Oof!”

I practically had the wind knocked out of me. I was so preoccupied that I ran into someone, nearly knocking myself down in the process. Damned heels! A strong arm swept around me, pulling me upright.

“Are you okay?”

Oh lord, there they were again—those incredible blue eyes. What were the odds against running into the same guy two days in a row. I felt like such a klutz. Then, I realized he didn’t seem to recognize me. Of course, I looked a lot different than I had the day before. Yesterday I was just little ole Fanny Farm Girl. Today, I was a sophisticated sales associate at Ovid’s largest (and only) department store.

“I’m... I’m fine,” I managed. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“The fault’s at least half mine,” he said gallantly. “I’m afraid I wasn’t paying attention either. You look like you’re in a hurry.”

“Oh,” I replied stupidly. Why was I so tongue-tied around this guy? “I was... I was just going to lunch.”

He smiled. “Well, I haven’t eaten either. Why don’t you let me buy you lunch to make up for this?”

I blushed. “Oh, you don’t need to do that. I mean...”

“But I want to,” he interrupted as he broke into a disarming smile.

“Please say yes.”

“Well... yes.”

Why had I done that? What was there about this guy? Maybe I just wanted a chance to prove to him over lunch that I wasn't a blithering idiot.

He grinned. “Great. Let's walk over to the Greenhouse.”

I wouldn't have agreed to walk if I had known that the Greenhouse was two blocks away. No, it isn't that I was in bad shape in my new body, but I found out quickly why so many women take athletic shoes with them to walk around at noon. Even on Ovid's smooth sidewalks, my feet were aching within a block. My toes seemed to be squished into the front part of the shoe while my heels hurt with every step. How did women walk in these things? Maybe it was how I was doing it. Although I handled the shoes fairly well, I still wasn't that experienced walking in them.

“I'm Scott Gorman, by the way,” he told me as we walked.

Gorman was a familiar name, I thought, as I told him, “I'm Donna M... Donna Potter.”

“Are you a student at Capra?”

There was that name again. And speaking of names, why was the name Gorman so familiar?

“No,” I replied. “I just graduated from high school.”

“You're kidding!” he remarked.

I smiled at him as we walked. “Why? I don't look old enough to have graduated?”

He laughed. “No, just the opposite. I'm twenty. I thought you were my age. You look a lot more... sophisticated than a recent high school graduate. But you look so familiar. Have we met before?”

Happily, I realized that he didn't realize I was the same little hayseed he had run into the day before. “I don't think so.” I wouldn't have

exactly called the previous day's encounter 'meeting.'

The Greenhouse was a nice little café. It would have hardly turned eyes in New York, but for Ovid, it was nice. There were lots of hanging plants and cozy little booths. Most of the lunch crowd had already left or was getting ready to leave. I even noticed the blonde from the courtroom, gathering up her purse and walking out. The woman lawyer was with her. They both gave me pleasant smiles as they walked past. Then, I heard one of them giggle. What was so funny? I wondered.

Scott showed me to a booth, and we each ordered an iced tea while looking at the menus. True to the promise I had made to myself, I ordered a small salad. After all of the meat and potatoes on the farm, I found myself really looking forward to as simple a fare as a salad.

Scott ordered the club. With the waitress gone, he leaned over and said to me, "You know, I'm really glad we bumped into each other. My social life was getting a little dull."

"Oh really?" I said, playing along. In spite of myself, I found I liked Scott. I'm not sure why. I've never really understood what attracts one person to another. Oh yes, I've heard of pheromones, but I've always been a bit of a romantic at heart. I've always thought attraction goes right down to the soul, whatever it is. Sure, I had only been a girl for a couple of days, but I was realistic enough to realize that if I was going to be a girl, I would develop a normal interest in guys. In fact, I had already realized from my little reveries that my attraction to men was growing steadily. I didn't plan to over-stimulate it, but I was realistic enough to know it as probably inevitable.

"Yes, really. You don't seem to believe me."

I grinned. "Well, a good-looking guy like you has to be pretty popular."

"Too much time studying," he explained. "Here, I've dropped right into the middle of finals."

"Dropped into?"

He lost his composure for a moment, coughing, "I mean, I wasn't

exactly ready for them this semester.”

“So what’s your major?” I asked.

“Business,” he replied, taking a sip of tea.

I envied him. Whoever he had been before, for he was real, here he had the opportunity to attend college, for that’s what Capra had to be. And he was a business major as I had been. He had a life that I could have enjoyed. Why hadn’t the Judge made me into someone like Scott instead of a farm girl with limited options? What had I done to piss him off?

“I’ve always been interested in business,” I told him truthfully.

“Then maybe you should go to college and major in it,” he suggested.

“Sorry, no money,” I sighed. “I’m afraid I’ll just be like that line in *Evita* about being behind the jewelry counter—not in front.”

“I remember that line,” he laughed. “Was it in the movie, too?”

“I never saw the movie,” I told him. “I saw it in Lon... I saw it on stage.”

He looked at me, his eyes narrowing. “You were going to say in London, weren’t you?”

My answer was delayed as our waitress delivered our lunches. When she was gone, I said, “Okay, you got me. I saw it in London in a previous life.”

“Well, that’s great,” he said. “I remember my old life, too. You’re only the second person I’ve met who remembers.”

“Apparently there aren’t a lot of us,” I commented.

He shook his head. “Not a lot.”

We just stared at each other for a few moments. Finally, I got up the courage to ask, “Were you... male before?”

“It’s not polite to ask,” he admonished me with a smile.

He was right, I thought, turning red. Why did I care anyway? He was

male now. Besides, I would be obliged to respond in kind. Did I really want him to know I had been a man? No, I answered myself honestly, I didn't. What I wasn't sure of was exactly why I didn't want him to know.

"Sorry," I said.

"Don't worry about it. I understand it's a common question," he told me. "I've just decided the less said about my previous life, the better. I've been given the chance to correct some old mistakes, so as far as I'm concerned, my previous life is a closed book."

"Fair enough," I agreed with a smile. "Mine, too."

Sitting there, looking at Scott, I meant it, too. I was never going to be Martin Brubaker, Jr. again, so there was no sense in discussing it. I needed to concentrate on what I was going to do as Donna Potter. And right now, for some reason I couldn't quite put my finger on, all I really wanted to do was to impress Scott. Fortunately, I seemed to be succeeding.

"So what do you think about this place?" he asked.

"It's a nice little café," I answered.

"No," he laughed. "I mean what do you think about Ovid?"

"I don't know what to think," I told him honestly. "I mean, none of this should be happening. With the g... I mean, with the powers that be like the Judge in charge, it's hard to imagine what their purpose is."

"You started to say something else," he noted. "Do you know who the Judge is?"

"Yes, do you?"

He shook his head. "I'm not sure. Can you tell me?"

"Nope," I said. "That seems to be one of the biggest taboos around here. If I try to tell you, I'll start gagging and won't be able to speak."

"Strange."

"That pretty well describes the whole town," I laughed.

“Well, I guess I’ll get to know it well. I’m signed up for summer school,” he told me.

That was great, I thought. He’d be here all summer and... I was getting very interested in him, wasn’t I? The thought of being interested in a man was extremely alien to me. Maybe we’d just be friends, I thought. Yes, that was it. We would be friends. It wouldn’t be a boy-girl thing. I wasn’t ready for that yet.

“So have you been in Ovid long?” I asked. “Or is that another one of those impolite questions?”

“I’ve been here a few days,” he replied vaguely. “And you?”

“Just two days,” I admitted. If Scott had been here longer than me, and it appeared that he had been, I was surprised that he hadn’t realized the nature of the gods. Of course, Vera had said I had been unusually quick to discover that aspect of Ovid.

We talked and laughed through lunch. Then, sadly, I realized I had to go back to work. He walked me back to March’s, and I found myself leaning on him a little to avoid putting too much weight on my sore feet.

“Sorry,” I told him after we had walked a block. “These shoes are a little tight.”

“Well, why didn’t you say something?” he asked. Before I could respond, he had picked me up, and to the astonished stares of Ovid’s pedestrians, carried me the last block to March’s front door.

“Thanks for lunch,” I said with a smile before he let me down.

He pulled me closer to him and gently kissed my lips. To my astonishment, I felt relieved. I kissed him back. “Any time,” he said, setting me down gently.

I thought that was it. I turned to go back to work.

“Say,” he called out. “How about dinner and a movie tonight to celebrate your new job?”

‘Why not?’ I thought. There was nothing holding me back. Besides, it

would be a lot more pleasant to spend my evening with Scott than with my 'father.' I smiled and nodded.

I gave him directions to our farm, finding myself a little embarrassed to admit that I was a farm girl. He didn't seem to mind, though. I was two inches off the ground when I reported back to work.

"Who is he?" Charlene asked during afternoon break. We were seated together at a small table in the break room.

"Who is who?" I asked innocently over my Diet Pepsi.

"Don't be coy," she admonished me. "He is a hunk."

Yes, I supposed he was. I told her about Scott.

"This is great!" Charlene giggled. "I was starting to get worried about you. You never seemed to be very interested in dating."

That was an interesting piece of information. I wondered why Donna Mae didn't date much. Maybe she hadn't been that interested in the farm boys, and maybe the town boys hadn't been very interested in her. If they saw her—me—now, I was sure they would have changed their minds. I had gone from hick to babe in just a few hours.

Somehow, I didn't seem to mind being a babe.

I was tired when Charlene dropped me off. It had been a long day, and I was looking forward to a bath and getting out of my heels. I was glad Scott and I had agreed to go casual that night. Shorts and sandals would cool me off.

My mother was waiting at the door when I came in. "What have you done to yourself?" she asked me.

I had almost forgotten that I had been transformed into a sophisticated sales associate during the day. "This is how I need to look on my job," I explained.

She tsked at me. "Well, you look like some sort of a floozy. You get out of those clothes and wash your face. Mr. Spencer is coming over for dinner."

"I won't be here for dinner," I said with a more casual manner than I

felt. I could see a crisis was about to occur. "I have a date."

The color drained from her face. "A date?"

"Yes," I said, setting down the sacks containing my old clothes, more new clothes, and my new cosmetics.

"You'll need to break it," she told me.

"I won't."

She was silent. "Your father won't like this at all."

I was thankful Scott was picking me up early. With any luck, I would be gone before he came in from the fields. I looked at my watch. Scott was supposed to pick me up in an hour. It would be one of the longest hours of my life, I realized.

I risked a bath. I was hot and sweaty after a day at work. Even under air conditioning, Oklahoma starts to get warm in May. It felt good to ease down into the tub, especially my poor sore feet. At least I would be in a lot better shape for my... date, thanks to the bath. I dressed quickly in khaki shorts and a cream-colored T-shirt. I slipped the most comfortable pair of sandals I could find on my feet. I was actually happy to note that the combination of instruction I had been given at the store and the auto pilot I had been given allowed me to put in earrings and do my hair and makeup about as fast as I would have been able to had I been a girl all my life.

Then, it was a waiting game. I wanted to be gone before my father found out about my date—or my job for that matter. I kept looking out the window of my room, listening anxiously and hoping not to hear the sound of his tractor coming in from the fields. My luck didn't hold, though. The deep rumble of the tractor engine could be heard approaching the house a good fifteen minutes before Scott was due. What would happen now? I wondered. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be good.

I heard the kitchen door slam, and faintly through the walls, I heard him talking to mother. At least he wasn't yelling. In fact, he seemed pretty calm. Then, I heard the door slam again and saw him heading

out toward the equipment shed. I rushed into the kitchen.

“What happened?” I asked my mother as she busied herself at the sink.

“I told him you had to go back to the department store for a meeting,” she told me calmly as she pared the skin off a carrot.

“He knows about my job?” I asked cautiously.

“Of course he knows. I told him at noon when he came in for dinner. You weren’t here and I had to tell him something.”

I felt like an idiot. I had been thinking like a townie again, or more specifically, like a city dweller. The concept of going home for lunch—or dinner, as farmers called it—was alien to me. Of course he had come in at noon for his meal and asked where I was. I should have realized.

“And my job—that was okay with him?”

“No, it’s not okay,” my mother told me. It was funny, but I was really starting to think of her as my mother now. “He just doesn’t know what to do about it—yet.”

“He doesn’t want me to quit, does he?”

She shook her head. “No. To be honest, we can probably use the money. Crop prices haven’t been that good lately, and expenses are high. That’s why I got him to go along with the job—for now.”

I was actually proud of her. She might not be the God of Real Estate anymore, but she could still sell the customer when it counted.

“Thanks, mom.”

“Don’t be thanking me yet,” she warned. “He has his eye on that Jess Spencer as a son-in-law. You’d better not get too interested in some other fella. If he thinks that job of yours is interfering with that, he’ll more as likely make you quit.”

I don’t know what bothered me more—the effrontery of my father, presuming that he could make such a decision for me, or my mother, assuming that I was really interested in Scott. I mean, interested in Scott in that way. “Mother,” I said deliberately, “Scott is just a friend.”

“He’s a friend right now,” she told me. “But you just wait until he has his hand inside your blouse. Then you tell me he’s just a friend. You got hormones, girl. They don’t always know who your friends are.”

Before I could answer, I heard a car pull up in front of the house. I was going to rush out to meet Scott, but before I could, there was a knock on the door. I silently cursed him for being so polite. If my father suddenly came in from the equipment shed and talked to him, mother’s story of a business meeting would be exposed.

Scott was neatly dressed in a polo shirt and a pair of shorts not unlike my own. He wore loafers with no socks and looked very preppy. As my mother opened the door to him, he smiled broadly and introduced himself. It was a good move, I had to admit. I could see my mother liked him at once.

“Hi, Scott,” I said brightly. “Let’s go.” I wanted him out of there before my father came in and all hell broke loose. He seemed a little surprised at my haste, but thankfully, he didn’t argue.

When we were safely away from the house in his little silver BMW Z-3, he asked, “Was your father home? I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to meet him.”

“Well, maybe next time,” I replied, hoping I could postpone that meeting for as long as possible.

It was a special evening, the first I could honestly say I had enjoyed in a long time. It was ironic that I had to become a girl to have a good time, though. I really did consider Scott a friend. We had a quick dinner at Rusty’s Burger Barn. I had to say, it was one of the best burgers I had ever eaten, and the waitress was the attractive blonde, Myra, who had been in my department earlier in the day. We even acted like old friends, in spite of the fact that we both knew we had known each other only a few hours.

I got a reminder of what Sam had told me, though, about only being able to talk about our old lives in twos. I tried to say something about all three of us remembering our former lives, but when I tried, my voice just sort of trailed off into nothing. Myra and Scott both gave me

an amused look. They knew what had gone wrong.

“Sorry,” I said meekly.

Myra put her arm around me. “Don’t worry. It happens to all of us at one time or another.”

As she hurried off to take care of a new customer, I decided I really liked her and resolved to get to know her better. I looked at Scott.

“This is all kind of hard to get used to,” I told him.

“You’re doing fine,” he said with encouragement. “Just relax and be yourself—the self you are now, anyway.”

That was good advice, and I took it. We talked about lots of things, but never who we had been. When we spoke of our lives, we spoke of our current ones, as if they had been the only ones we had ever known.

I found out why Scott’s name was so familiar. His father was in real estate—or had been until his death. Scott was really Scott R. Gorman the Third, and his father had been an important figure in real estate along the Eastern seaboard. I remembered the name because he had been an actual person. To my knowledge, he didn’t have a son, so my Scott was a creation of the Judge. I wondered why he had done that. I suppose the local college needed a few well-to-do out of state students to meet expenses. Why not just create a few? I asked Scott about that, and he agreed.

“That’s what I figure, too,” he said between bites of burger. “In any case, it’s made me the principle heir to a pretty hefty fortune.”

That explained the Z-3.

“It sounds like you made out a lot better than many of the transformees,” I commented.

He looked at me seriously. “Including you?”

I flushed. “I thought we agreed not to discuss our old lives.”

“I’m not,” he pointed out. “I’m discussing your new life. I mean, it seems to me you didn’t do too badly. When I was in court, I saw another defendant turned into an eight-year-old black girl. She didn’t

look like she was going to have an easy time of it.”

“Did she remember who she had been?” I asked, curious. I supposed misery loves company.

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. She walked out of the courtroom with her new mother as if she had been the little girl her entire life.”

As we walked out together to head for the movie, I was thinking about the other information I knew about Scott’s father. In my reality, he had made some serious mistakes. He had backed the wrong horse, so to speak. Scott’s father had thrown in with a guy named Donald Trump, a real estate baron who thought he could topple my father from his pinnacle. It hadn’t worked. Trump had been ruined, and men like Gorman who had backed him were ruined with him. I seemed to remember that Scott’s father had killed himself over the entire affair. His father was dead in this reality as well, but I was sure it wasn’t from the same cause.

“What did your ‘father’ die of?” I asked as we drove downtown to the theater.

“Heart attack,” he replied. “Apparently, the success was too much for him as nearly as I can tell. I only know that because I talked with his—my now—lawyer about it right after I was changed.”

So even though reality had shifted, the dead were still dead. I actually felt a little better knowing that my father’s actions had apparently not shortened Scott’s father’s life. Of course, maybe they did. It was just possible that not even the gods could bring someone back from the dead. Something else to ponder, I realized. If I remembered my mythology right, people came back from Hades on occasion. Come to think of it, the residents of Hades were often known as shades. Did that mean most of the residents of Ovid were dead? They didn’t seem dead.

In small towns, movies are often delayed by weeks or months compared to their runs in cities. Ovid had only one theater, an older building that had been remodelled into a twin screen. I doubted if the town would have even had two screens, except for the fact that there

was a college in town. *Titanic* was just finishing up its week long run. I got the idea that it was the second time around for the film in Ovid, but it was still doing a brisk business. I supposed with school out, audiences got bigger.

Of course, like most people, I had already seen *Titanic*. From the conversations I heard in the lobby, most of the patrons had seen it before as well, either on its initial run in Ovid or someplace else, like Tulsa. Most people, though, probably didn't have the added experience that I had had seeing it for the second time. The first time, I had seen it through male eyes. I had been dazzled by the special effects and enthralled with the Herculean effort of the crew to evacuate the sinking ship. Now, though, I was seeing the film through different eyes. My mind seemed focused on the ill-fated romance of the two leads. The ship was just the setting for the romance. I found myself identifying with Kate Winslet's character, and during the romantic scenes, I found I had unconsciously snuggled up next to Scott.

The love scene had a particularly odd effect on me. When I had seen it as a man, I had thought it was a rather mild scene. As a woman, though, I found my body actually tingling with delight as she made love to him. Then, in the scenes in the water, as her lover was dying, I found there were tears in my eyes. I couldn't help it. The more I tried to hold back, the worse it got.

"Are you okay?" Scott whispered to me as we walked out of the movie.

I snuggled up tighter against him. "Uh-uh," I sniffed. He held me a little tighter and I felt better.

"What's wrong?" he asked me as we walked together back to his car. His arm was gently around my waist.

"I just feel like such a wimp," I told him. "I mean, crying in a movie like that."

"You weren't the only one," he pointed out.

“I know,” I agreed. I had heard other girls sniffing as well, and the number of red eyes coming out of the theater made it look like the passengers of an overnight flight from LA to New York. How could I explain it to him? He didn’t know I had been a man before. When he found out, he probably wouldn’t want anything to do with me—unless he had been a woman. I doubted that, though. He was just too good at being a man to have ever been a woman. “It’s just that... I don’t usually blubber like that in movies.”

He turned me to face him, his arms around me. “Well, I’m glad you did,” he said, bending down to kiss me.

So that’s where I got my second kiss as a woman—right there on the sidewalk in front of the Rivoli Twin Theater. I didn’t want to like it, but I did. I liked it very much. Hesitantly, I broke away.

“What do you want to do now?” he asked.

It was an important question. When I had asked it as a man, I had always hoped the response would involve someone’s bed. Not this time, though. I wasn’t ready for anything like that, although I was realistic enough to realize I would have to come to terms with sex as a woman eventually. “I have to work tomorrow,” I said softly. “I’d better go home.”

I knew he was disappointed, but he didn’t show it. He bent over, giving me another kiss, this time less passionate, and said, “Okay.”

So there I was, on the front porch of my little farmhouse, watching as Scott drove away. We had kissed again parked in front of the house, but it had gone no further. My internal thermostat seemed to have raised my temperature by a couple of degrees. I knew it didn’t really, but it had felt like it. Here I was, mentally a normal male, but my body was telling me something different. It was telling me I was a female with all the normal female drives. And it was telling me strongly enough that I knew it was only a matter of time until I had to give in to my body’s needs.

“So how was your date last night?” Charlene asked me as I hopped into her car the next morning.

It was the first time I had had to answer that question. My parents had been asleep when I got home, and my father was already in the fields when I came down for breakfast. My mother had said nothing. I think she was curious, but I supposed that the less she knew, the less she would have to hide from my father.

"It was fun," I said, trying to sound noncommittal.

"And how much fun was it?" she asked with a grin.

"None of your business," I answered with a grin of my own.

She laughed.

Vera March was on the floor, I suspect to see how well I had learned my lessons in femininity. She looked over my makeup carefully, nodding with approval. "The earrings are a little plain for that outfit," she told me. They were just a pair of cheap ones I had bought in the store that morning, since I had forgotten to put earrings in that morning. I was finding that getting ready for anything as a girl was a lot more work than I had imagined. There was so much to remember—like earrings.

"The blouse is fine," she commented. It should be, I thought. It was a light gray with enough ruffles to look feminine. I had bought it there in the store the day before.

"Where did you get the skirt?" she asked.

The skirt was a plum colored pleated skirt, coming down almost but not quite to my knees.

"It was in my closet," I replied. "I haven't had time to build up my wardrobe yet."

She smiled. "The skirt will do just fine. I hadn't realized there was anything stylish in that closet of yours. It looks good on you. I approve of the hose, too. They're just the right shade to go with that skirt. And the shoe—they're black and that's fine, but there's no heel."

"I thought flats would be okay," I told her. I cringed at the thought of walking the floor in heels again.

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not, dear. They make you look a little too girlish. A nice sling back with a two-no, make that three-inch heel will add a degree of sophistication to that outfit. Go over to the shoe department and get some. Just put them on your tab."

"Yes, ma'am." At this rate, there wouldn't be any pay check at the end of my week. I owed my soul to the company store, as the old song went.

"Oh, and Donna?"

I turned. "Yes, Ms. March?"

"How was your date last night?"

I gasped. Was nothing private from these... these... gods?

"It was fine," I managed to say with a gulp, turning again for the shoe department.

As expected, by noon, my feet were killing me. I had bought a pair of dark gray sling backs and decided to live dangerously—they had a three-inch heel. I had to admit, the shoes did improve the look of my outfit. On more than one occasion, I sneaked a look at myself in one of the mirrors. My legs were really quite pretty. I imagined as a farm girl, I would have had a fair amount of exercise, and my legs showed it. They were long and firm, and the higher heel made them look their best. The slightly gray shade of hose I wore made my legs part of an overall symphony in plum and gray. The gold of my jewelry, rather than conflicting, actually complemented the look. I was amazed at what I had learned about dressing as a woman in only a couple of days.

Another more troubling thought crossed my mind as I helped a customer. A very attractive shade woman was looking for just the right outfit for her anniversary, and I had been helping her. She chose a very daring number. It was what I had come to know in my new job as a merry widow. It was in black, with demi underwire cups and removable garters. It was designed to show off maximum cleavage and make men stiffen at the sight of a girl dressed in it. The disturbing

thought was that as the woman held the outfit up to herself and said “What do you think?” I found myself thinking not of how attractive she would be in it, but rather what I might look like in it. I had the right color hose at home. Of course, mine were panty hose and I would need stockings for the outfit. My new shoes would look great in it. It would make Scott—I meant any man—hot for...

“I said, what do you think?”

“Oh!” I said, jerking myself out of the fantasy. “I think it’s just... darling. You’ll look great in that.”

“Do you think my Stan will like it?” she asked with a giggle.

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll love it,” I replied with a little giggle of my own.

As she walked away with her purchase, I couldn’t help but envy her. She might just be a shade—whatever they were—but she was comfortable with her femininity. I wondered if I would ever be that comfortable. I wondered if someday, it would be me looking at that rack of sexy nighties and slinky underwear. I touched one of the silky nighties, sighing gently to myself.

“It’s very pretty,” a male voice said behind me.

Embarrassed, I dropped my hand from the nightie and turned. “Scott! What are you doing here?”

He grinned. “Just passing by. I thought you might be free for lunch again.”

I looked at my watch. “It’s only twelve. I don’t get off until one.”

“Oh, go ahead,” Vera’s voice called out to me from the aisle. Had she been watching me as well as I caressed the nightie. Oh, god! What must they both think of me?

“But...” I began.

“We’re not very busy today,” Vera explained. “I’ll watch your department for a little while. Why don’t you go have lunch with the young man?”

It was a suggestion, but from the Goddess of Love, it somehow had the ring of a command. Yes, I wanted to be with Scott, but I could feel that need to be with him being amplified and widened in my heart. Scott offered me his arm. I took it with a smile, turning to Vera.

"Thanks Ms. March."

"Happy to help," she laughed. I turned from her and looked only at Scott as we walked to lunch.

"It's not as good as the Greenhouse," Scott explained as we walked into Moore's Café, "but since it's only a few doors from March's, I thought you'd appreciate not having to walk too far in heels."

I smiled in appreciation. If I was going to keep walking, I would have to bring a pair of sneakers to work to walk to lunch in. I was indeed grateful for the opportunity to have lunch without the long walk. Safely at a booth, I kicked off the heels and rubbed my nylon clad feet together, sighing in relief.

"You don't know how good it feels to get those off," I told him with a sigh as the menus were delivered.

"I can imagine," he said. Could he? I wondered if he was just being polite. Obviously, Scott had been someone else before he came to Ovid. Maybe that someone had been a woman. I didn't think so, though. He didn't act as if he had ever been a woman. He seemed content with being who he was. Of course, I was sure he had had at least a couple of weeks to adjust.

"I'd stick with the simple fare here," he told me. "I hear the sandwiches aren't bad, but there're no good salads or anything like down at the Greenhouse."

Ovid was lucky to have the Greenhouse, I thought. Moore's was more like cafés I had experienced in smaller towns. The tables and booths were dark wood, the chairs a little uncomfortable, and a slight smell of grease wafting out of the kitchen. It was strictly old-fashioned Midwestern cuisine. Go ahead and order the hot beef sandwich with lots of mashed potatoes, but don't look for an Oriental chicken salad because it won't be on the menu. I settled on a club sandwich, which

appeared to be one of the entrees least likely to stop my heart in mid bite. Scott was more daring, ordering a burger and fries. I sighed to myself. If I were still male, I might have risked that, too, but I remembered the old saying—a moment on the lips and a lifetime on the hips.

“At least let me buy today,” I offered. “You’ve bought almost all of my food for the past two days.”

He grinned. “Nope. I’ll pay. It’s the price I have to pay to eat all my meals with a lovely lady. In fact, how about dinner tonight?”

“I shouldn’t,” I said reluctantly. “I really need to see my parents. I haven’t talked to my father in two days.” I needed to see what he thought of my job. Also, it would be a little hard to play the meeting at work card again.

“Then how about dessert?” he suggested. “I can pick you up about eight. We can go get an ice cream. There’s a little place over by the college that serves a great double dip.”

“Oh, all right!” I laughed, unconsciously laying my hand on the back of his. “But just for a little while. I’m a working girl now.”

He bought my lunch in spite of my protests and had me back at work by one.

“Did you have a good time?” Vera asked pleasantly.

“Yes,” I admitted. Then, after a moment, “Vera?”

“Yes, Donna?”

I had a question, but I didn’t know how to phrase it. I was very new at being a girl. By all rights, I should have been railing against my fate, but I wasn’t. I seemed actually almost comfortable being a girl. In spite of the restrictions placed upon me by my strict father, I felt I had more freedom as Donna Mae Potter than I had ever had in my previous life. Vera was a goddess. I needed to know why all of this was happening to me. Why was I a girl? What was I supposed to be doing?

“Those are interesting questions,” she commented with a smile.

“But I didn’t say anything,” I said.

She smiled at me. “Donna, you may never know why you’re a girl or why you’re here, or even what you should be doing. You are here to live your life as best you can, just as you were before Ovid. You are a girl now because you are, just as you were male before because you were. Don’t try to put too much meaning into these events. Just live your life as you think it should be lived.”

“You mean if I decide I can’t take the idea of making love to a man, I can be a lesbian?”

“I’m afraid not!” she laughed. “That’s frowned upon here. We’re a little too small town Midwestern for that. Besides, would you really want to be a lesbian?”

“I might,” I replied, more for the sake of argument than anything else. The truth of the matter was that the idea of having sex in this body with another woman had very little appeal to me. The problem was the better men—or specifically Scott—looked to me, the more frightened I became. As much as the void between my legs seemed to want to be filled, my mind argued that it wasn’t normal to have a man stick anything there.

“But it’s very natural,” Vera argued.

“Will you stop getting into my thoughts?” I said with exasperation, turning away from her.

“I wouldn’t be there if you didn’t want me to,” she explained. “Let me help you, Donna.”

Before I could reply, I felt a sudden sense of well being. It was as if the aching void between my legs had somehow been filled. There was nothing physically inside me; I knew that. But there was a feeling. I felt... accomplished. I felt whole. I looked at her as the wave ebbed inside me. “Is that what it’s like?” I asked in a whisper.

“No,” she replied. “When it’s done correctly, it’s much better.”

“But—” I turned to face her, but she was gone.

When Charlene dropped me off that evening after work, my father was waiting for me in the living room. He put down the paper he had been reading and inspected me critically. I had not felt uncomfortable when Vera had inspected me, but my father's scrutiny was most unpleasant. He just stared at me with his brow furrowed. "Is this the sort of thing you have to wear to work in town?" he asked at last. He made it sound as if 'working in town' was somehow immoral.

"Ms. March likes us to dress this way," I said in my own defense.

"Like a whore?"

I flushed. "I'm not dressed like a whore."

He put his thumb and forefinger on my chin and examined my face. "Look at you! You're wearing too much makeup."

I pulled away from him as he continued, "And that skirt. It's so short men will see your privates."

Thank god he hadn't seen my skirt the day before. It was even shorter.

"I want you to go into that bitch Miz March's office tomorrow and tell her you don't want that job."

"But I need a job," I protested. "I have to earn a living."

"No you don't," he told me harshly. "I talked just today to Jess Spencer. He's gonna ask you to marry him."

"Marry him?" I asked. "I barely know him!"

"You'll get to know him," my father replied. It wasn't a prediction; it was a pronouncement.

"I won't!" I practically yelled, storming out of the room and up to my room. I slammed the door behind me and threw myself on the bed, unbidden tears streaming from my eyes. What was going on here? Why was I being treated like this? If the Judge had to turn me into a girl, why couldn't it have been someone more in charge of her life? Why did it have to be someone ruled by an overbearing father...

I sat up on the side of the bed feeling very sorry for myself. I had always been ruled by an overbearing father, I suddenly realized. When I had been a man, I had been told where to go to school, what to major in, who I would marry, what job I would do. Oh yes, I had led a privileged life. Many would have envied me. But my life had never been my own if I were truly honest with myself. My life wasn't my own as Martin Brubaker Junior and it wasn't my own as Donna Mae Potter. I would never be Martin Brubaker again, I was sure of that by now. But as Donna Mae Potter, I had to become my own person.

But how? I had not been able to break away when I had been male, well educated, and well off in my own right from trust funds and savings. How was I to do it in the body of an eighteen-year-old, barely a grown woman, with no money, only a high school education, and a father who, although he had not physically hurt me, seemed capable of physically enforcing his will.

There was a gentle knock at my door. "Donna Mae, are you all right?" my mother's voice asked.

"I'm okay," I called out with a quaver in my voice.

The door opened. She stood there with a look of motherly concern on her face. How ironic, I thought, that my real father whose only concerns in all the years I had known him had been money was suddenly given the role of a concerned mother. If there was anything of the old man left in there, he must have been ready to blow a gasket.

"You know," she began, "your father only wants what's best for you."

"He only wants me to marry the farmer next door so he can operate a bigger farm," I grumbled.

She sat down beside me and put her arm tenderly around me. "I know it must seem like that, but Jess Spencer is a fine man. You'll not find a better one, dear."

She might be right, I thought, but that didn't change the fact that I wasn't the least bit interested in marrying Jess Spencer—or any other man for that matter. I supposed I might have to consider marriage

sometime in the future. I knew my perspective was changing. I was starting to notice men. Worse yet, I was starting to wonder what it would be like to... be with a man. There would come a time when I'd have to surrender to my new body. But not yet, and certainly not in marriage.

Could I love a man? It was an odd question, I knew. I was a woman in every way that it counted, and I supposed I could, but Jess would never be the one. And how about Scott? Yes, I could, I realized. That's not to say that I did love him. We were just friends. But the potential was there. Of course, I really didn't know much about him, but that didn't matter—yet. Maybe someday. Maybe not.

I followed my mother downstairs, carefully avoiding my father who was busy sulking in the living room. I helped her fix dinner—excuse me, supper—then joined them in a mostly silent meal.

One thing I had learned about my new father was that when he was angry at me or my mother, he tended to sulk quietly. It was as if he was trying to tell us that we weren't worth talking to. He thought he was being strong. I thought he was being an ass. At least, I was grateful for the quiet. I really didn't want to talk to him.

Mother and I got the dishes put away just before I heard the sound of a car pulling up in front. I had almost forgotten that Scott was planning to take me out for ice cream. I hurried to the door, only to be stopped by my father's voice.

"And where do you think you're going?" he challenged me.

"Just out with a friend—for ice cream," I replied honestly. I heard Scott's footsteps on the porch. He knocked on the door.

My father opened the door and just stared at a startled Scott. "Is this your friend?"

"Yes," I replied.

He turned to Scott and said, "You'd better go on, boy. She can't go out with you tonight." His voice was harsh and the tone final.

Scott looked at me as if for guidance. "You'd better go," I told him. "I'll

talk to you tomorrow.”

He looked at my father and me, obviously trying to decide if he should stay or go.

“Go on, Scott,” I urged him. “I’ll be fine. Just go.”

“If you need me, give me a call,” Scott said, leaving reluctantly.

My new father and I stared at each other like two savage animals until the sound of Scott’s car faded into the night.

“You had no right to do that,” I told him through clenched teeth. I was so frustrated in this body. I doubled my fists, longing to have the power to hit him and knock some sense into him. I knew I could do no damage, though. I was too weak—too much of a girl to be able to force my will on him physically. In that moment, even consumed by anger, I knew fear—the fear all women have when confronted with overwhelming physical force. I was too weak to hurt him, but he could hurt me in a heartbeat. Just because he hadn’t physically abused me before didn’t mean he couldn’t do it whenever he chose.

“I have every right!” he boomed. “I’m your father. Now, tomorrow, you’re gonna quit your job and you’re gonna tell that fella that you don’t want to see him again—ever. Do you hear me?”

I said nothing, so he came closer to me, raising his meaty fist and yelling, “I said do you hear me?”

I gulped. “I hear you.”

“Good. Then you get up to your room, and you get that whore paint off your face and get to bed. You’ve got a busy morning ahead of you.”

I obeyed. I wanted nothing at that moment but to be out of his reach. I practically ran to my room. I obediently removed my makeup, not sure if he would come up to check or not. I was frightened—truly frightened. I had never been so afraid in my entire life as either sex. I knew deep down that I had pushed him too far. If he sensed for a minute that the threats weren’t enough, he would hurt me.

“Donna Mae?” It was my mother’s soft voice at the door. She opened

the door timidly and entered as I was getting on my nightie. "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"No," I said, trembling. "He's a... a... monster!"

She rushed over to me. "Now you be quiet," she said just above a whisper. "He's still up and he's still mad. You don't want to rile him."

"Tell me something," I asked her. "Has he ever hit you?"

The question stunned her. "I've never given him any cause to hit me," she replied at last. "He's the man of the house. I wouldn't be a fit wife if I gave him cause to hit me, now would I?"

I looked at her dumbstruck. Was that really my father inside this mousy little farm wife? Was it really the man who had stared down governors who was wearing that frumpy print dress and apron, afraid to disobey some ignorant farmer who barely made a decent living on a small Oklahoma farm?

"But it's not right!" I told her. "He may have figured out how to run your life, but he's not going to run mine."

"Now you listen to me, Donna Mae Potter," she said seriously. "He's your father and you're going to do just what he tells you. You're going to quit your job, forget that town boy, and settle down to be Jess Spencer's bride and raise lots of farm babies. It's what your father wants."

"But what about what I want?"

"You're a grown woman now," she said primly. "You're not some little girl. What you want doesn't matter."

Oh yes it did, I thought after she had left. That creature calling itself my father hadn't won yet, I thought as I gripped my pillow in the dark, tears welling up in my tired eyes. What I wanted was going to matter. I had a plan.

I got up early the next morning—even earlier than usual. For the first time, since my transformation, I was happy to have to carry a purse. I selected the largest one I could find—not a new stylish one that I had

purchased at March's, but an old ratty one, large enough to carry whatever I needed. I dumped as many of my new cosmetics as I could in the purse. I looked at my face, fighting back the urge to apply something to my face. No, I thought. I would probably have to stand inspection from my father. If I wore cosmetics, he would order me to wash off my face. I had no desire to confront him. If I did, he might decide to inspect closer.

Next, I got dressed. I put on the outfit that I had gotten my first day at Marches, thankful that the skirt was shorter than anything else I had in my closet. It would make the next step easier. I next selected one of my 'farm girl' dresses—knee length and drab tan in color, with long sleeves which were loose enough to fit over the sleeves of my good dress. I slipped on a pair of worn black flats, stuffing panty hose and my new two inch heels in the over sized purse. Jewelry to go with the outfit went into the purse, too. I hoped my father didn't find it suspicious that my purse was so full. I had to depend upon the fact that the contents of a woman's purse would always remain a mystery no man really wished to solve.

I drew my hair back into a flat, boring ponytail. I looked awful, I thought, without a trace of the male I used to be in that ruminant. But at least I looked like the farm girl my father expected me to be.

I rushed through my morning chores, thankful that my father hadn't interrupted his own tasks to examine me. With any luck, his inspection of me would be a short one as I walked out the door. My mother, too, was too busy to question me, but I thought as I hurried through the kitchen, setting the table as I went, that she wanted desperately to talk to me.

I wolfed down a bite of breakfast on the run so I wouldn't have to stand close inspection at the table. I used the excuse that Charlene had said she might be early that morning. I was sitting alone in the living room, hoping with all my might that she would actually be a little early when my father walked in.

He looked at me carefully, and I began to perspire, frightened that somehow, he would see through my disguise. How did all the comic

book superheroes run around all day wearing two sets of clothes? Even early in the morning, it seemed too warm. At least I hoped it was the heat that was making me perspire. I hoped my father didn't notice.

"Well, now you look like a proper farm girl," he finally allowed, almost affectionately. "I'm glad you've given up this nonsense of trying to be something you're not."

Trying to be something I wasn't? I had to stifle a giggle. Here I was, trying to be a girl when my mind still told me I was a man. If that wasn't trying to be something I wasn't, I didn't know what was.

Before I had to answer him, I heard Charlene pull up in front. "Gotta go," I muttered, picking up a purse that must have weighed as much as an army backpack. To my relief, my father did nothing to stop me.

"What happened to you?" Charlene asked with a gasp as I slid into the car.

"My father wants me to quit and marry Farmer John down the road," I explained. Charlene knew all about Jess; we had talked about the problem on breaks.

"So what are you going to do?" she asked, concerned.

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "Look, Charlene, could I spend a few days at your house?"

She looked uncomfortable as she drove. "I'm sorry, honey," she said at last. "I'd like to help you, but things aren't so rosy at my house either. My dad doesn't think much of my working at March's. Besides, he and your dad are good friends. He wouldn't allow it."

My heart sank. Charlene was my best hope. The solution was going to be more difficult now, but there had to be an answer that didn't involve my becoming Mrs. Jessie Spencer.

Vera March saw me enter the store. There was no misreading the disappointed look on her face. "Is something wrong, Donna?" she asked me. "It doesn't look like you're dressed for work this morning."

"Oh, Vera," I said, tears forming. "I've got to talk to you."

In her office, I was able to tell her the whole story. She sat quietly, listening to every word. "And that's it," I said, finishing. "My work clothes are on underneath this dress. It will take me a few minutes to get ready, but I want this job, Vera. I want to be independent. I'm not going back to that farm, even if I have to sleep in the streets."

She gave me a motherly smile. "I don't think it will come to that," she assured me.

"Then... then you can help me?" I asked hopefully.

Her eyes were a little sad. "Oh, Donna, I wish I could. I'd love to take you home with me and help you through this, but it's against the rules."

"The rules?" I echoed.

She nodded. "Yes, there are rules, even for us. Only the Judge can interfere so directly, and he usually doesn't."

"But he could? Could he change me back—or at least change me into a man?"

"He could," she admitted, "but he won't. Besides, do you really want to be a man again?"

There was the question I had not dared to ask myself. Every hour I was in this female body made me more of a woman. If someone had asked me a week before what I would do if I were suddenly changed into a woman, I think I would have told them that I would roll myself up into a big ball and stay there until I either changed back or died. I would never in my wildest dreams imagine that I would learn to dress and act as a fashionable woman, and then risk my own personal safety for the right to go on dressing and acting in that fashion. Being Donna Mae Potter was becoming natural to me in ways I could never have imagined before.

"Well, do you?" she asked again.

"I... I don't know," I answered truthfully. "I guess no one gets to go back to their old life once they're changed, do they?"

She shook her head with a faint smile. "It hasn't happened yet, at least."

"Then if I have to be someone else, I think I like being who I am now," I finally admitted—both to Vera and to myself. "When I was a man, I never had the... courage." I snickered to myself. I had almost said 'the balls' instead of 'courage.' Vera smiled, too. I think she knew what I had almost said. "I just never had the courage to fight to be myself. I guess this is why the Judge did this to me. I guess he thought if I was not willing to fight to be my own person, I might as well be a little farm girl who did what her father told her to do—even if that meant marrying a man she didn't love."

"The Judge doesn't always explain why he does what he does," Vera told me, "but I suspect you're correct. It would fit the pattern of his sentences."

"So what can I do?" I asked, the tears coming again. I don't think I had cried more than twice since I reached puberty. Now, it seemed as if almost anything could turn on the waterworks.

"Well," Vera began slowly, "your job is secure. According to Nora, you're doing an excellent job." She grinned. "I think so, too, especially for someone who never wore women's clothing before this week."

I smiled in spite of myself. "I like my job," I told her. When I stopped and thought about it, it was really the first time in my life that I could say that.

"Then go ahead and get changed," she told me. "And just have faith, Donna. This will all work out eventually. It usually does here in Ovid."

I hurriedly made myself presentable, feeling almost as if I was stripping off a disguise as I did. I suppose I was when I thought about it. Because of my past life, I was much more of a town person than a country person, but to escape my father, I had had to wear a disguise.

I managed to get out on the floor only fifteen minutes late. Nora had covered for me. It hadn't been a problem. There were very few early morning shoppers in Ovid. I settled into what was becoming a

comfortable pattern for me, helping customers and straightening up the merchandise. Nora had even taught me a little about displays that would sell, so I even had a chance to experiment with that.

I never dreamed I would feel happiest working in the lingerie department of a small town department store. It seemed about the most unlikely fate I could ever experience. I realized that no matter what happened, I had made the right choice. I never wanted to see the farm again.

“Good morning.”

I had been woolgathering—a common activity on a slow morning in retail. I hadn’t even heard him come up behind me.

“Scott!” I cried, turning to hug him. He returned my affection. I was so glad to see him. “I was afraid my father scared you off for good.”

“No such luck,” he said, kissing me gently on the lips. “I’m afraid you’re stuck with me. What happened last night?”

I quickly told him the story of my fight with my father.

“So are you quitting?” he asked.

“Does it look like I’m quitting?” I laughed.

He shook his head and smiled. “I guess not. What about the other part?”

“The other part?” I asked.

“About me,” he said.

“Oh Scott,” I said seriously taking his hand. He looked like a hurt puppy dog. “You’re my friend. I couldn’t change that even if I wanted to.”

“Well,” he said, “if I’m going to be your friend, what can I do to help?”

I thought about it for a moment. “Well, do you know of anybody I can stay with for a few days. I don’t think I want to chance going back to the farm, and I need someplace here in town until I sort things out.”

He smiled. “That’s a simple request. You can just stay with me until

you find a place.”

I must have looked shocked, for he added quickly, “Look, it’s nothing like that. It’s a pretty good sized apartment. You can have the bedroom and I’ll take the couch in the living room. No hanky-panky. Scout’s honor and all that.”

I wondered what the good residents of Ovid would say about my staying with Scott. I suspected this town, like most small towns, was a little blue nosed. I didn’t want to be branded as the town harlot. But I realized I had little choice. All I had been to scrape up in cash was forty dollars, and even with my paycheck, that wouldn’t be enough to stay at a hotel, even in Ovid. Charlene had turned me down, and I really didn’t have many friends in Ovid—certainly none who I knew well enough to ask for help. If I didn’t stay with Scott, I would have to go back home, and that meant I would be a slave to my father’s wishes for the rest of my life.

“Thanks, Scott,” I replied sincerely. “It’ll be just until I can get on my feet.”

“Stay as long as you like,” he said, looking around at two women who were examining some foundation garments. “It looks like you have customers. What time do you get off?”

“Five.”

He smiled and gave me a gentle hug. “I’ll pick you up.”

The rest of the day went by quickly. Our department was busy, and I had little time to think about what I was about to do. Finally, it was five o’clock, and I saw Scott walking toward me. It was time to set my plan into action.

I picked up the phone and called home. My mother answered the phone. Thank god, I thought. I didn’t wasn’t to talk to my father.

“Have you quit yet?” she asked me without preamble. “I thought you might just quit this morning and come on home.”

“Mother, I’m not going to quit,” I told her. “I’m not coming home, either. I’ve made arrangements to stay in town. I’ll be moving into town, too.”

“Oh my god!” she exclaimed. “Donna Mae, you don’t know what you’re saying. Your father...”

“My father is a good part of the reason I’m doing this,” I interrupted. “I’m not going to let him run my life this way.”

“He won’t give up,” she warned me. “He won’t rest until you quit and marry Jess Spencer. You know how bull-headed your father can be.”

No, but I was starting to have a pretty good idea.

“Donna Mae, don’t ruin your life like this. You go tell that March woman you’re going to quit and get back out here. I’ll come pick you up.”

“I’m sorry, mother,” I replied as Scott walked up to me. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“But where will you be?” she asked tearfully.

“I let you know later,” I told her, hanging up. Thank god we had never discussed Scott in detail. Even if they figured out who I was staying with, they had no idea who Scott was or where he lived.

There. I had done it. The die was cast. I had no way of knowing what the cost would be, but I was determined to be my own person, and not the person my father wanted me to be. It was funny. If I had developed such resolve as Martin, I might not be in this position now, I noted. As Martin, I had made the mistake of letting my father run my life. I wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.

“Are you ready to go?” Scott asked softly. He could see in my eyes what I was going through.

“Yes,” I replied, equally softly.

His apartment wasn’t much, but by Ovid standards, it wasn’t bad. This was a small town, after all, and there weren’t large modern apartment complexes. It consisted of a living room, kitchen, bedroom, and a single bath. It was fairly Spartan in furnishings as well, but the couch looked comfortable, and good to his word, there was a blanket on it for later.

“Ovid could really use more apartments,” he told me. “Vulman Industries apparently has picked up a major military contract. They’re hiring like crazy and a lot of new people will be moving in.”

“Real ones?” I asked as I looked around his apartment. There was evidence he had spent a good part of the day just getting the place shaped up. I couldn’t help but think it was sweet of him.

He shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. Apparently all sorts of people wander into Ovid for all sorts of reasons. The Judge doesn’t seem to be short of raw material, although apparently there was an incident here not too long ago that has slowed down the process.”

“Where did you learn all this?” I asked, impressed.

“Oh, around campus. Some of the other students remember who they were. They all talk back and forth, spreading information. Did you know, though, that only two people can talk like this at a time? If someone else were to join us, we couldn’t discuss the magical aspects of Ovid.” Then he stopped, remembering our little conversation with Myra, I was sure.

“So I’ve noticed,” I replied wryly, dropping my stuff off at the end of the couch. “Look, Scott, I really appreciate your doing this for me. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t offered me a place to stay.”

He smiled. “Don’t mention it. Look, let’s keep it light. I’m a pretty decent cook. Let’s make up a salad, some spaghetti, have a little wine, and celebrate your freedom.”

“It sounds like a plan,” I replied with a smile of my own.

He was, indeed, a pretty decent cook. In fact, I had expected a little Ragu out of a jar, but Scott made the sauce from scratch. I started wondering as we made dinner together, then ate, just who Scott had been before. By mutual consent, we hadn’t discussed our previous lives. I had assumed, though, that Scott had been in Ovid for a few weeks. He was very much at ease with who he was. He must have been male before, I thought. Yet he handled himself in the kitchen like

many women I had known. Yes, I know there are men who are excellent cooks; I hadn't been bad at it myself. But there were some more feminine mannerisms that came into play when he was in the kitchen. First, there was the way he cut things. Men tend to cut toward themselves while women cut away. Then, there was his neatness. Men are notorious for making a mess in the kitchen, expecting someone else to clean up, or just not caring. Scott was the neatest male I had ever seen in the kitchen.

There was nothing effeminate about him, though. In fact, he was comfortably masculine. Of course, I was beginning to realize that it was easier to be a man than a woman. Oh, sure, men were expected to carry themselves in a certain way—to be strong, as it were. But women had to be correct in so many more ways. We had to dress properly, making sure everything was coordinated. We had to practically be artists just to get our hair and faces right. We had to be graceful as we teetered on heels and demure in our relations with others. And of course, many men—such as my new father (and the old one when he was male for that matter)—expected us to always defer to them.

“More spaghetti?”

Scott's voice brought me back to where I was. “Oh. No thanks. It was great, but I have to watch what I eat.” Another problem being a woman, I thought to myself.

“Well,” he said, “then go ahead and finish off your wine and I'll clean up.”

“No, I'll help,” I told him. “Besides, I think I've had enough wine.”

I had, too, I reflected as we cleaned up. I had drunk three glasses of Chianti. As Martin, that wouldn't have fazed me. As Donna, though, I was feeling a warm buzz from the stuff. To make it worse, as we finished, Scott put a snifter of brandy in front of me.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?” I asked suspiciously.

“Nope,” he grinned. “You have to be a real lush to get drunk on

brandy. You're supposed to sip this stuff. I figure one shot of this should last about an hour."

It did, too. We sat together on the couch—close together—and watched a movie together. He had rented *When Harry Met Sally*. I know, it had been around a hundred times, but it was one of those enduring movies most people enjoy over and over. Of course, I found myself unconsciously identifying with Meg Ryan's character instead of being desperately in love with her as my male self had been. I had never thought much about Billy Crystal as a handsome guy, and as a girl, I still didn't, but I found there were other things which made him endearing.

I don't know exactly when it happened. I think it was about the scene where Meg Ryan finds out her former lover is getting married and is busily crying her eyes out. Scott had had his arm around me at first, then I was snuggled up against him. Then, suddenly, I turned, right next to his face. We just sort of blended together in a long kiss. I was used to the sudden swelling between the legs when kissing someone I was attracted to. Not this time, though. Instead, there was this warm feeling between my legs—a sensation of yielding and softening, unlike anything I had ever felt before. Then, of course, there were the nipples. How odd, I thought in an almost clinical way. It was as if instead of one big erection, there were little ones in my nipples and my crotch.

Then, I stopped thinking and started reacting. We didn't say a word to each other. Instead, we gently but insistently began to undress each other. I was starting to understand how important foreplay was for a woman. There was a desire building inside me, and the more it built, the more I wanted it to increase. I was nearly ready the moment Scott carried my now-nude body to the bed.

How to describe it? I had made love many times as a man. I had enjoyed it immensely. But I had never enjoyed it like that first time with Scott. As a man, I had felt the sudden explosion, concentrated between my legs. Oh sure, there had been a sense of well being, but there was also an almost immediate sense of loss, as if the pleasure

had somehow flowed out of my body with the orgasmic burst. As a woman, though, the pleasure was more like a wave, commencing when he exploded into me and rushing through my body. In a word, it was incredible.

He held me tenderly afterwards, and I began to realize why that was important, too. It was almost as if in some small way, it allowed me to share the wave of pleasure with my lover. By holding me, it seemed to make the ebbing sensations last a little longer. Of course, it also gave me time to think about what I had just done and why as Scott slept gently beside me.

I hadn't intended it to happen. There had been no nagging question in my mind as to what sex was like for a woman. I had planned on being entirely platonic with Scott, and I think he really had meant his promises to me to keep it that way. Maybe it was the fact that I had just broken away from my family, as artificial as they might be. Maybe I just needed someone, and Scott was the closest thing I had to a friend in Ovid. Maybe Billy Crystal was right in *When Harry Met Sally*. Maybe men and women couldn't be friends. How do they explain it at the end of the film? First, we became friends. Then, we became lovers. And then, we got... married?

Oh god! Was that going to be next? Was this a one-night stand, or were we lovers? Would I become Mrs. Scott Gorman? I shuddered. I wasn't sure I was ready for that. But it might be necessary, I realized suddenly. Neither of us had considered protection. Oh good lord, could I be pregnant? What was in me now, swimming merrily upstream into a part of my anatomy that I could never have imagined having only a few days before?

As I drifted slowly off to sleep, I began to realize the next day could bring an entirely new set of problems.

I woke early. Being a farm girl had done that for me. So imagine my surprise when I saw Scott sitting naked on the side of the bed looking at me. I started to throw back the covers when I suddenly realized that I, too, was equally nude. I had a momentary pang of modesty before realizing that I had nothing that I hadn't already shown Scott the night

before.

"You're up early," I said, trying desperately to sound cheerful.

"I couldn't sleep," he admitted.

"Bad dreams?"

He shook his head. "Conscience."

I said nothing. I simply looked at him, confused.

"Look, Donna, I know who you are—were, rather."

My mouth fell open. "But how...?"

"Look, it's confession time," he told me. "I'm Margo Simon, or at least that's the name you knew me by."

Now I was really shocked. Scott was Miss Simon, my father's secretary. I mean, I knew she and Rusty, our pilot, had probably met as odd a fate as we had, but I never would have imagined her being changed into Scott. Scott had seemed so comfortable with Ovid. I had just assumed that he had been around for a few weeks. His comment about finals threw me off. Most colleges would have been finished with finals by now, so I assumed he had meant that he had come to Ovid a week or two before me. Then there was the way he carried himself in his role as the young, wealthy heir. I could have kicked myself for not seeing through all of that.

"But are you saying you weren't really Margo Simon?" I ventured.

"No. My real name was Samantha Gorman."

"But wait," I said. "Your last name is Gorman now."

"That's true," he said with a sigh. "Look, do you know what your father did to my father?"

"Wait," I begged. "I'm confused. Are you telling me that you... your father was Scott Gorman Junior even before you came to Ovid?"

He nodded. "Strange, isn't it? I was his only child. I always used to think that if I had been born male instead of female, I could have been more help to him. Be careful what you wish for, though. Now, I'm

male, and yet it didn't seem to make any difference. Now, do you remember what happened to my father?"

"Roughly," I admitted carefully. "I know he was ruined along with a guy named Trump when my father outmaneuvered them."

"Outmaneuvered!" he snorted. "That's a polite way of saying it. He arranged for loans for my father and Trump. What they didn't know is that he controlled the institutions that made the loans. He waited until my father and Trump were way out on a financial limb. Then, he made sure the loans were called in early. He ruined them both. That's when my father suffered a stroke and died. I blamed your father for it. I was going to college at Sarah Lawrence when he died. I couldn't help but think that if I had been at my father's side—and male—I could have helped him. But dad never thought a woman had any place as a real estate developer. So after he died, I vowed revenge against your father. I dropped out of school. I had a friend in college whose father ran a large private investigation firm—J. L. Rickett and Associates."

"I know them," I told her. "My father used them for background checks on key employees."

Scott smiled. "That's right. I used that contact to get my name in front of your father as a personal secretary. I planned to get the job and gather evidence against him. I could expose him to any number of government agencies who would have joyfully tacked his hide to the wall."

"But you might have gone down with him," I pointed out. "Everyone in his company signed non-disclosures."

He put his hand on mine and looked into my eyes. "Don't you understand, Donna? I didn't care. My father was my only family, and I loved him very much. I would have done anything to get even with your father for what he did. I would have even killed him if I had to."

I withdrew my hand and looked away. "Then this was all part of your revenge," I murmured softly.

"At first, yes," he admitted. "The Judge changed Rusty into that little

black girl I told you about. Then he changed me into Scott. After I was changed, I knew it would only be a matter of time until the Judge got around to you and your father. I hung around the courts, hoping he hadn't changed you first. I was about ready to give up when that odd cop—Mercer—brought the two of you in. Imagine my surprise when the two of you walked out unchanged! So I followed you as you drove out to your farm. Then I saw you jump out at the mailbox and realized you had been changed as radically as I. It just took a little longer. From what I understand, that's not uncommon. The problem was, I wasn't sure if you were who you were or if you were your father. I staked out the farm the day you interviewed and followed you into town. I got too close, though, and bumped into you. I still didn't know if you were the son or the father."

"Did it matter to you?" I asked bitterly.

"Yes," he replied frankly. "I had nothing against you. Although I didn't get to know you very well—your father saw to that—I began to consider you as much of a victim of your father's machinations as I was. Then, on the plane, you tried to help me."

"I didn't think you'd remember that," I said. "I thought you were out cold."

"I was," he agreed, "but I seemed to remember hearing your concern for me. It was almost as if I could feel it. Also, I remembered that you volunteered to go up to the cockpit for me in the first place."

"Then why take out your revenge on me?" I asked, breaking into a sob. "Look what you've done to me."

He hurried to my side of the bed. Sitting next to me, he tried to put his arm around my naked shoulders, but I shrugged him away.

"Look, Donna, you're wrong. I admit, at first I just wanted to get closer to you to get at your father. I had to know if he remembered who he had been. Revenge wouldn't be any fun against some person who thought she had always been nothing but a farm wife. But then I got to know you. Donna, I really do love you."

That was too much for me to take. Exploding in tears, I rushed to the bathroom and slammed the door. To think, I had actually fallen for Scott! I had surrendered to this new female body of mine and given it over gladly to him. And he had used it. I felt dirty. Oh god, what if I was pregnant? I'd get an abortion. I wouldn't have his child. I'd show him. I wondered for a moment if abortions were even permitted in Ovid. Probably not, I realized.

There was a knock on the door. "Donna, please come out. Please listen to me. I'm sorry for what I did."

"You're sorry for screwing me?" I yelled as I hurriedly dressed.

"No I'm not sorry I made love to you," he corrected. "I'm sorry I deceived you. I should have been honest with you. You know the funny thing about all of this?"

"I don't find anything funny about it," I growled, wrestling with a bra strap. Damned breasts! Damned vagina!

"The funny thing," he went on, "is that my father died anyway. I thought his failure killed him. But in this reality, he was successful and still died. I guess he was just meant to die."

I finished dressing. It wasn't my best effort. It was just a pink spring weight knit blouse and a pleated gray skirt. A couple of accessories and a quick makeup job and I was about ready for work.

"Donna, at least let me drive you to work."

I looked down at my heels. It had to be over a mile to March's. I couldn't do it in heels. I would have to accept his offer. I opened the door and stared at him. "All right, but that's it. I'll be back tonight for my stuff. Then I never want to see you again."

The look on his face was one of pain. Was I being too hard on him? I didn't think so. He had used me to get to my father. Then, as soon as he found out he didn't need to get to him (now her), he screwed me and... and... told me he loved me? No! He had lied to me. He must have.

"Let's go," I said.

We didn't speak on the way to March's. I made it a point not to even look at him. When we got to the store, he stopped in front and said, "Donna, I know I hurt you. I used to be a woman. I should have remembered what it meant for a man to hurt a woman. Please find it in your heart to forgive me. I do love you."

I didn't look at him and I didn't answer. I slammed the car door and marched into the store. I should have felt triumphant, but I didn't. I felt lousy. By the time I was riding the escalator up to my department, I was feeling even worse. He told me he loved me. He meant it, I realized. I also realized that I had feelings for him as well. Was it love? No, it couldn't be! The bastard had deceived me. But if it wasn't love, what was it?

"What's wrong, Donna?" Vera asked me as she stepped out of her office.

"Oh, it's just... I can't explain. You wouldn't understand. And I don't want you to read my thoughts."

She laughed, "I don't really have to, Donna. I suspect it's about love. Think about it, dear. Who would know more about love than me?"

I stopped. She was the Goddess of Love. Who else would know more? I had to speak with her. She ushered me into her office to the now-familiar chair across from her desk. This time, though, she didn't sit behind the desk. She chose the mate of my chair and sat close, facing me.

"Now, tell me all about it," she commanded.

I did, leaving out nothing. I know I must have blushed when it came to admitting to having sex. I felt as if I had just admitted to some perverted exercise, but Vera merely nodded in sympathy.

"So now here I am," I summed up. "For all I know, I may even be pregnant."

"No, dear, you're not pregnant."

"I'm... I'm not?" I asked hesitantly.

“No,” she confirmed. “Usually, new girls like you are encouraged to take birth control pills. It’s often included as part of the automatic responses. However, for girls like you...”

“Virgins,” I clarified with a sigh.

“Yes, virgins, that often isn’t practical. So all new girls—virgin or not—are given a ninety day grace period in which they can’t get pregnant. I might add, new men get a similar dispensation, so with Scott, you’re doubly protected.”

At least that was off my mind. I leaned forward, toward Vera. “But what am I going to do now?”

Vera leaned toward me. “What do you want to do?”

It was a good question. I had to be honest with myself. What I really wanted was...

“You can’t go in there!” It was Nora’s voice, frightened from just outside the door. The door was flung open, and there he was—my father. My mother was trailing close behind, concern in her eyes.

“You’re interrupting a private meeting between me and one of my employees,” Vera said coldly, not in the least intimidated by my father’s murderous stare.

“She ain’t gonna be your employee no more!” he boomed. “She’s goin’ home with us!”

My mother rushed to my side. “Oh, Donna Mae, we were so worried about you! After you called we called the police, but that Officer Mercer said there was nothing he could do. Then your father and I drove into town, searching every street for some sign of you. We were afraid you had run away with that Scott boy, but we couldn’t remember his last name.”

“It’s Gorman,” a voice from the door said calmly but forcefully. I looked over my shoulder to see Scott in the doorway, staring as defiantly as my father. To me, he said, “I saw them pull up in front of the store as I was leaving. I thought I’d better make sure you were all right.”

My father turned to him, his fists clenched. “Were you with my daughter last night?”

Scott ignored the question. “Donna, do you need some help?”

“I... I don’t think so,” I told him. I stood and faced my father, coming between him and Scott. “Where I was and what I do isn’t your business,” I told him, trying to sound calmer than I felt.

“You’re my daughter! It is my business!” he yelled.

I would have loved to tell him that I really wasn’t his daughter, but he would never have understood. Even if he had understood, I don’t think it would have changed his mind.

“Mr. Potter,” Vera said suddenly, “do you love your daughter?”

“You stay out of this,” he growled, his gaze never leaving me.

“MR. POTTER, DO YOU LOVE YOUR DAUGHTER?” Vera never raised her voice, yet somehow, her question drowned out every other sound in the room.

My father turned to face her, his face white. “What?” he said softly. “Of course I... love her.”

“What is love, Mr. Potter?” she asked.

“It’s... it’s just love,” he replied, confused with the question.

“Do you love her enough to let her go?” she asked quietly.

“Let her go?”

I know there was magic in the room. Vera was, after all, the Goddess of Love. I don’t know what rules the gods were required to follow, but I know that Vera—or rather Venus—did something to let us all know what love was. It wasn’t something that could be verbalized, but it could be felt. I think in that moment, my father understood for the first time in his life what it meant to love someone enough to let them go. He had, of course, rationalized that he was doing what was best for me. Jess Spencer was a good man, and I had no doubt he would make some girl a fine husband, but he wasn’t right for me. Somehow, I could see

into his mind and realized that he really did love me—and my mother as well. And he seemed to come to an understanding of what he needed to do if he was to have that love returned.

He turned to me. The blood lust had left his eyes, and the look he gave me was unlike any look I had ever gotten from a male parent. “Do you want to go, Donna Mae?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to go anywhere,” I said honestly. “I just want to be my own person. This the first time in either... in my life that I’ve had the opportunity to be my own person. I want to keep on being my own person, wherever that leads me. Do you understand?”

“I... I think so,” he told me.

It was impulsive, I know, but I rushed to him and hugged him. I think there may have even been a little tear in his eye. He gave me a little smile, and I smiled back.

“Well,” Vera said suddenly, “if that is settled, we do have a store to run here. Donna, Saturday is our busiest day. I need you out on the floor, but I’ll give you a few minutes here to wrap things up while I help Nora.”

She was suddenly gone, leaving me with my parents—for they were now my parents—and Scott.

“Honey?” my mother ventured, “are you coming home tonight?”

I looked at them for a moment before answering. “I’ll be there after work,” I told them at last. “I’ll get a ride with Charlene.”

“I’ll take you home,” Scott volunteered.

I could see the look of suspicion rising in my father’s eyes again.

“I’d like to look over the Casper farm, so it’s on my way,” he explained.

“The Casper farm?” my father asked carefully. “That’s right next to our farm.”

“Yes it is,” Scott agreed. “And it stretches all the way to the edge of

Ovid in the other direction. I understand it's for sale. I think the edge next to Ovid would be a good place to build a few homes and some apartments. Ovid's growing, you know."

"You've got that kind of money?" my father asked bluntly.

"I sure do," Scott answered glibly. "I've been thinking about just settling down here in Ovid. Of course, there's more land there than I'd need. I'd have to lease the rest of the Casper place out for farming."

My father thought for a moment. "I might be able to help you there."

"I'd be much obliged," Scott said formally. "Maybe we can talk about it this evening."

My father looked at my mother. The only signal she gave him was a smile. Turning back to Scott, he said, "Well, seein' as how you're gonna be bringing my little girl home, you might as well stay for supper. We can talk about it then."

As they left, I saw the twinkle in Scott's eyes.

"You bastard!" I muttered. "You had that all planned out."

"It's a good business move," Scott protested. "Ovid is growing, and there aren't enough apartments here. I've got the cash from my inheritance, and I'm sure I can leverage it into a bank loan to buy that farm. Your father can farm the land and pay the debt service for me. Then I'll free up enough credit to build on the land next to Ovid."

"Oh, it's a good business deal all right," I admitted grimly, "but you used it like a dowry to buy my hand."

He laughed, putting his arms around me. "Oh, come on, Donna. Sure, it works out well, but you are your own person now, just like you wanted. I'll do that deal no matter what you decide. It's good business as we both know. But I love you, Donna, and I do want to marry you."

"Marry me?" I asked in a tiny voice.

"Marry you," he confirmed with a smile.

I was silent for a moment, but I didn't shirk from his arms. Finally, I felt

my own arms moving around his waist, and I began to feel the attraction I had felt the night before.

“Well,” I said coyly, “since you’re going to be talking to my father tonight, I suppose you could ask him for my hand, too...”

“Wow!” Diana remarked. “I like that Donna. She sounds like she has cojones.”

“Actually,” I said drolly, “I believe the Judge took away her cojones.”

“There are different kinds of balls,” Diana said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Just because girls have their balls inside with an entirely different function doesn’t mean they don’t have them at least in a metaphorical sense.”

“So one question,” I said as I refilled her coffee cup. “Donna speculated that some of the transformees who don’t seem to remember who they were might really just be prisoners in their own bodies. Is it true?”

I had asked the question for a reason. I hated to think that my former fraternity brothers might be trapped inside the bodies of my family whom I had come to love as a wife and mother.

“Nope,” she said simply, sipping at her coffee. “For the most part, the Judge lets random chance decide who remembers and who doesn’t, but he hasn’t created a situation like you described—yet.”

I was relieved. “Well, it sounds like the Judge has it all under control.”

To my surprise, Diana laughed. “You think so? Silly girl!”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Well,” she told me, rising to her feet and, with a wave of her hand, redonning her leather and silver tunic, “coffee break is over. I’ve got to get back to the set. See you in the movies!”

She was gone in the blink of an eye, but her laughter lingered on.

Ovid VII: The Director

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You would never expect to find a beach in Oklahoma, would you? Well, Sunset Beach was a pleasant surprise. Of course, it was really situated on a clear blue lake called Lake Pelias, and the sand was all trucked in, but on a hot summer afternoon, it was just the place to be.

All the land around the lake was owned by a Brad Nelson. He had trucked in the sand and installed a gravel parking lot. Two dollars apiece got you in past the gate. Then, you could use the bathhouse, rent a locker, ride the merry-go-round, pig out on the overpriced hot dogs and snow cones, or just lie around on the beach and work on your tan. No beer, though. After all, this was a family place and it was Oklahoma.

Brad Nelson would stroll around the beach, chatting with his patrons, even delivering drinks and food if someone requested it. He was a wiry little guy with a full beard, brown with a touch or two of gray. He usually just wore swim trunks and thongs on the beach, so he sported a full, even tan.

Brad was probably Neleus, one of Neptune's sons, I realized. I was really getting pretty good at my Greek and Roman mythology. Of course, living in Ovid tended to do that to you. After a few months in Ovid, you tended to wonder when you met someone (a real someone—not a shade) if they were part of the pantheon of Olympic gods. Then again, he might have been just a pleasant guy named Brad Nelson, transformed by the Judge into the upbeat guy who ran Sunset Beach. I tended to believe he was Neleus, though. After all, if he was, Lake Pelias was named for his twin brother.

"Hi, Cindy!" he called out to me. He didn't look me in the eye, though. Although I had been a woman for several months now, this was my first experience wearing a bikini—in public at least. It seemed that being an attractive woman meant that the less you wore, the more you

got stared at—particularly the more impressive parts of your anatomy. I was glad I had been transformed in the fall. That had given me a chance to get used to my new sex before displaying the merchandise so obviously. I kind of liked being stared at, though. When you're a mother of two, it's nice to know you can still get a guy's attention.

"Hi, Brad," I called back, looking up from the romance novel I had been reading. That was one of the occupational hazards of being a woman. I would never have dreamed of reading one of those romances when I was a man, but as a woman, they seemed just about the right thing to read.

"Where's Jerry?"

"Over there," I said, pointing to the handsome man laughing and splashing with the two young blonde children—one a boy and the other a girl—that were our twins. We had all once been fraternity brothers at Notre Dame. Then, we went through Ovid and our lives—and identities—were completely changed. Only I remembered our previous lives, though, and I didn't really care about that any more. We were just the happy young family we appeared to be, and that was fine with me.

Brad turned to the lovely young woman next to me. "And how are you, Susan?"

"Never better," the attractive brunette lying next to me engrossed in her own romance novel replied with a friendly smile. A passerby, seeing her lying there in her white bikini would never have imagined that she had once been one of the top criminal lawyers in the country—and a man at that. She was still a lawyer, but no trace of the man remained. Susan Jager was all woman, and happily married to a man who had once been her wife. Ovid could be so confusing sometimes.

"I saw Steve over playing volleyball with some of his students," Brad said.

"That's Steve for you," Susan grinned. "He can be so macho sometimes." If Brad was in on the true nature of Ovid, he would understand the humor in Susan's statement, since her husband Steve

had only been a man for less than two years. Brad gave a noncommittal smile. If he was associated with the gods, he didn't want to discuss it. Some of them did, but most were indistinguishable from the regular citizens of Ovid—and they seemed to prefer it that way.

One of the most distinguishable was suddenly standing before us as Brad sauntered away. She appeared to be about sixteen, with long blonde hair and a pink bikini about the same shade as mine that emphasized rather than hid her ample figure. One look in her dancing eyes made you realize she was no ordinary sixteen year old. She was instead a goddess, her eyes wise beyond her years. She appeared in many different forms in the time I had known her, but somehow, I could always recognize her.

“Why the youthful appearance, Diana?” I asked her, smiling.

She gave me a little girl smile in return. “Because it's the best age to be when you're at the beach.” She plopped down beside us, her breasts sagging so suddenly that a poor teenage boy carrying two cokes nearly tripped and spilled them all over himself. “Old ladies like you are always content to sit around reading romances instead of living them.”

“Now wait a minute!” Susan and I chorused as we threw down our books.

Diana giggled. “So now are you two going to tell me about your love lives?”

Susan smiled sweetly. “Mine may not match yours for variety, but for quality, Steve can't be topped.”

Diana laughed, “I think you've just zinged me. Good one, too!”

It was hard to be catty around Diana. She always appreciated a good cut, even when she was the target. Of all the gods and goddesses who inhabited Ovid, Diana seemed to be the true free spirit. Sometimes, I think she liked us poor humans more than she liked her fellow Olympians.

“So you're going after the high school boys today?” I asked her.

“I might,” she said coyly.

“But first, you’d like to hear a story,” I surmised.

“Got any good ones?” she asked excitedly, turning to smile at a young lad who actually had to shift his swim trunks so his erection wouldn’t show.

“How about Sly?” Susan suggested.

“Yes, I want to see Sly’s story,” Diana said excitedly as she sat beside us. I didn’t blame her. Sly was one of our more interesting new residents. Since the Judge had given me the power to document the stories of our new residents, it would be almost like climbing inside Sly’s mind—and an interesting mind it was, too.

“Okay,” I agreed. “Are you both ready?”

They nodded avidly.

I began to slip into my trance as I mumbled, “Then here we go...”

“So are you going to sleep all day?”

The melodious baritone cut through the fog of my sleep like an icebreaker through thin ice. It was noisy and it hurt. I silently vowed to myself to use a little more moderation the next time I partied. I couldn’t carry on now like I could when I was twenty. Or thirty. Or forty. I groaned, rolling over, my arm flopping out until it landed on a soft mound of flesh next to me.

“Ow, Phil!” a whiny voice cried out next to me. “You bruised my right boob, you dick!”

“Don’t call me a dick or you’ll be looking for work,” I managed to growl. Actresses. You always have to remind them who the boss is, I thought. I didn’t have to even open my eyes to know that the whiny voice next to me belonged to Janice Lamuse, my number one porno—excuse me—exotic star. She had all the acting talent of a walk-on in a high school play, but she could shake those silicon-enhanced hooters all over the screen and make it look like she just couldn’t get enough

of that big schlong all those porno—excuse me—exotic actors seemed to have.

“Come on, it’s ten o’clock,” the baritone voice urged. “We’ve got a plane to catch.”

“Plane?” I muttered, rubbing the back of my neck in a vain attempt to keep the back of my head from splitting open. Damned Italian wine. It always sneaked up on me. Sure, it tasted mellow the night before, but this morning, after a couple of bottles of it the night before, mixed with a pack of cigarettes and a line of coke, I felt like shit. No, I take that back. Shit had to feel a whole lot better than I felt.

“Yeah, the plane,” the baritone repeated, over the whimpers of my lovely bed mate. “The one taking us to the location—remember?”

“Fucking movie business,” I grumbled, pushing myself up off soft flesh.

“Ow! now you got the left one!”

“Tough shit,” I muttered, opening my eyes in the bright California sunlight for the first time that day. The baritone was standing in front of me, a grin on his too-handsome face. God, what I wouldn’t give to look like him, I thought. Six-two, muscles that seemed to ripple even when he wore a suit, blonde hair that was bleached almost white from years of surfing, and a tan that would make George Hamilton green with envy—what a package! To get girls in bed with me, I had to promise them a part in my next movie. To get girls in bed with him, all my baritone had to do was smile and look into their eyes. They would be pulling their own clothes off while they followed him to the nearest bed.

“Come on, Sunshine, I need to take a piss and you’re standing in the way,” I growled at him.

Apollo Sun—what a name, huh?—just smiled that little smile of his. “I told you to go easy last night.”

That was Apollo Sun for you—the master of going easy. I was sure it wasn’t his real name. Hell, who in Southern California used their own

name if they were in the entertainment business? The lovely Janice Lamuse, for example, was born with a different name, I was sure. Cute name for a porn... exotic actress, I thought. So who knew what Apollo's real name was? Under that name, he had been a professional surfer and won more than his share of championships. Nobody seemed to know where he was from or what his real name was, and I suppose nobody cared. Besides, it was probably something like Apollonius. He was probably named for his old Greek grandfather or something, although he didn't look Greek. I called him Sunshine just to jerk his chain, but he didn't seem to mind.

As he stood aside, allowing me the closest route to the bathroom, I had to admit he was a lucky find. I had been shooting a little Beach Bunny film not too far away from my Malibu digs, and he had been one of the extras. Unlike most of the male bimbos that strutted up and down the beach, surfboards in hand, Apollo seemed to have some smarts. He had asked me about the movie business, and I had given him the answers.

It was funny, I thought as I relieved myself, I took an instant liking to him. That was unusual for me. I think it was because he treated me as if I was an artist and not just another sleaze-ball T&A director. Also, he didn't seem to be interested in showing off his pecs in front of the camera like his surfer brethren. Instead, he wanted to know about the business of movies.

So I told him. I told him that behind all the perceived glamour of the movies, there was a business that was more like running a circus than running a company. There were egos to be soothed, locations to be scoped, palms to be greased, and deals to be done. Most good ideas go down the shitter, and bad ideas get made into movies. Usually, the reality of the movie business is enough to send most guys like Apollo back into the waves playing Surfer Dude. In other words, it's hard work, and most male bimbos don't want anything to do with hard work.

Apollo was different, though. He was actually able to grasp the business end of movies quicker than anybody else I ever saw. I wondered if he was the reincarnation of Jack Warner. Whatever he

was, he was a godsend to me. With Apollo on my team, I could stay busy writing and directing and let him take care of the nitty-gritty details. He got a co-producer credit on film, along with me.

Me? I'm Phil Malone. Never heard of me? Well, I'm not surprised. Hollywood is the home of the great and the forgotten. Guys like George Lucas, a classmate at USC, are the great. Me? I'm the forgotten. Mostly, movie buffs remembered me for one film. It was made back in '75 when I was just twenty-seven. The film was called *A Night in Olympus*. No, it wasn't one of those *Clash of the Titans* things. It was about a kid whose dad deserted him and his mom died when he was sixteen. He thinks his dad was somebody important and seeks him out, finally confronting him one night at his palatial home. Want to know the ending? Rent the movie—or I guess you can't now.

Anyhow, it looked like my career was going up, up, up. But it wasn't. I only thought it was.

The next movie I was offered was the one that was supposed to put me up there in lights. It was a little story, written by some minor Italian actor named Stallone. I forget his first name. It was about a boxer who takes on the champ—a real David and Goliath story. The only problem was this Stallone guy wanted to play David. I told the studio “no.” He was too short and mumbled his lines. Either I picked the cast or I didn't direct. They caved in. After all, after *A Night in Olympus*, I was the wunderkid. I picked a young rising star for the part. His name was Matt Cardone, and even though he had never made a movie before, I touted him as the next Brando.

In a word, the movie tanked. Oh, the Italian kid—Stallone—got an Oscar for his screenplay. He went on to be one of the top screenwriters in Hollywood. Me? I got the reputation of being a perfectionist who couldn't bring in the big box-office bucks, even when they dumped an Oscar winning script in my lap.

As I've said, making movies is a business. It may not be like making cars or computers, but it's still a business with a bottom line. When the powers that be decided I couldn't pad the bottom line, my phone stopped ringing.

Oh, I got some little films, but they had limited distribution. Finally, I had to lower my price to even get those films. Eventually, even the little art film companies stopped calling.

To say I had gotten both frustrated and jaded would be an understatement. The frustration led to a few bad habits involving booze and drugs. The jaded part led to a whole new career which, if not satisfying, was at least profitable.

We live in an era of video recorders and hundreds of channels on satellite and cable. Everybody is looking for programming, and it doesn't have to be good. It just needs to be cheap and fill time. See where the jaded part comes in? So I found a whole new career making cheap films. I'd make a little adventure epic à la Roger Corman. You know the type—a lot of action and plenty of T&A to make the viewers forget that none of the players can act their way out of a paper bag. Then you sell them to direct-to-video outfits and cable networks. Then, you take some of the action scenes and splice them to make them into mild porn films. That way, all you have to shoot are the really steamy parts. Of course, I never use my real name as director of the porn films. I do have some pride left, I thought to myself. Not much, but some.

“Are you going to stay in there all day?” Apollo called out.

I squeezed my eyes. There I was, leaning against the wall with one hand, my dick in the other dribbling the last few drops into the toilet bowl. I had practically ruminated my way back to Dreamland. I needed some sleep. I needed a shower. I needed a smoke and a line of coke. I needed...

It took an hour, but I managed to get myself together. I looked more like those guys who spit on your windshield and try to clean it for a buck than I did a Hollywood director. My skin looked pasty under the fading Malibu tan. My gray hair was getting thinner, and my gut showed I hadn't gotten much exercise in years. I wore a shirt that although still flamboyant had not been stylish in five years and some tan Dockers deck shoes with no socks completed my ensemble. For accessories, I chose a pair of cheap sunglasses. Anything to block out

the day.

As I re-emerged, looking—I thought—reasonably human, I lit a cigarette and was rewarded with my ever-increasing smoker's cough.

"You need to put that out," Apollo told me. "The cab is here."

"Cab? What's this about a fucking cab?" I muttered, taking another drag of smoke into my lungs. "Since when don't you have a car?" Apollo never seemed to drive the same car twice. "My chariot" he would always call whatever car he was driving. Leased them, he said whenever I would ask him why he seemed to have an unlimited supply of cars. I didn't argue, though. Wherever the money came from, our pictures always made plenty of money. That's what I really liked about him. We were 'co-producers,' but the truth was that Apollo handled the business end. All I did was direct. I liked it better that way.

"My car isn't available now," he said simply. I knew better than to ask more. All I would get was another of his cryptic answers. Sometimes, I didn't know what to think of Apollo. It was as if the kid dropped down here from another planet. Maybe all that surfing affected his mind.

As usual, he had taken care of everything. My bags were packed and being loaded in the trunk of the cab. I knew Apollo would have packed everything I needed. He always did. Damn, but the kid was a find! Janice was already snuggling her ample butt into the faded back seat. Why the hell had I agreed to let her star in my next picture anyway? Oh well, I thought, she'd provide a lot more entertainment than the girls out in...

"Where the hell did you say we're going?" I asked Apollo. "Kansas?"

"Oklahoma," he corrected.

"Oh, yeah," I agreed, throwing my cigarette into the potted plant just outside my front door. I got a breath of sea air. It cleared my head a little bit. The house wasn't much, but the view of the Malibu coast from my deck was worth it. Now, I'd be spending the next three weeks in Oklafuckinghoma making another flick for late night cable. What the hell?—it was a living.

Apollo from the front seat gave the driver our destination as I sagged back into the back seat next to Janice trying to make my head stop pounding. I nestled my head down into her soft breasts and sighed as she stroked the top of my head. I managed to actually fall asleep, hoping that the ride to the airport would take about three days.

"Time to get out!" Apollo called cheerfully only what seemed to be seconds later.

"Let me sleep," I grumbled, trying to burrow further into Janice's breasts.

"Come on," he urged. "We're at the airport."

I opened my eyes and looked around. "What airport? Where the hell is the terminal?"

"It's a private field," he explained.

Yeah, real private, I thought. There was nothing there but a dirt strip that looked far too short for any airplane I had ever seen. Come to think of it, the plane wasn't any airplane I had ever seen. I didn't know much about private planes, but the aircraft poised for takeoff on the strip didn't look quite right. First, its lines were a little too clean and too streamlined. Next, it was hard to tell where the fuselage ended and the wings and tail began since there were no seams. The windows were tinted so heavily that I couldn't understand how the pilot could even see out. There appeared to be no windows at all in the passenger cabin. To top it off, the plane was gold in color rather than the expected silver or white, and there were no markings on it anywhere.

"What the hell kind of a plane is this?" I asked him.

He just grinned. "A very fast and reliable one. Now, if you'll hurry along, we'll be on our way."

Reluctantly, I stumbled out of the cab with a little help from Janice. She steadied me up the stairs to the plane. Funny, I thought, I hadn't seen those stairs before, and I hadn't heard them extend from the plane. I had a bad feeling about that plane. Of course, I didn't like to

fly in the first place—especially on private planes.

Inside, the plane would have done Air Force One proud. I swear it actually looked bigger on the inside than it was on the outside. It was bright as daylight, in spite of the lack of cabin windows, and the seats were so plush and luxurious that they made regular first class airline seats look like camp stools. Gratefully, I sank down into one and sighed.

“Bloody Mary, sir?”

“Huh?” I opened my eyes and saw a young woman dressed as a flight attendant. Where the hell had she come from? I hadn’t seen her when I got on board. She was incredible. She was tall, dark hair, laughing eyes, and a figure that made Janice look like some cartoonist’s version of a woman. I mean, she was absolutely perfect in her proportions. She reminded me a little of an actress Apollo had found for our last picture. We used her to play a Xena-type warrior princess, although this girl wasn’t as statuesque. I wondered if the two were related.

“Bloody Mary, sir?” she repeated with a twinkle in her eye.

“Uh... sure, honey,” I managed. “What’s your name anyhow?”

“Oh, just call me Di,” she replied, placing a drink on the little tray next to my chair. “Just call me if you need anything else.”

“I can think of a few things I might need,” I said with a leer. She didn’t seem offended. She just gave me a little smile and walked to the rear of the plane. I swivelled my seat around. “Oh, Di...”

She wasn’t there. I wondered if she had just served the drinks and left. No, there was a compartment in the tail of the plane. It was probably a restroom, I reasoned. She must have gone in there. Funny I hadn’t heard the door open or close.

“Strap in,” Apollo reminded me from the seat in front of me. He was helping Janice get her seat belt on in the seat across the aisle from him, and he appeared to be enjoying every second of it.

We were airborne in moments. It was one of the smoothest takeoffs I

could ever remember. Since there were no windows, it was hard to tell that we had even left the ground. No windows was fine with me, though. I've always hated looking out when I fly. I don't like to be reminded of how far down the ground is.

"Is the rest of the cast and crew going to meet us in this... what was the name of the town again?" I asked.

Apollo swivelled around to face me. "Ovid," he replied with a smile.

"And yes, they're going to meet us day after tomorrow."

"Mostly locals?" I asked. It wasn't an idle question. One of the reasons so many movies are made in the hinterlands is that it is easier to avoid paying union scale. Oh, the actors are Guild members: Screen Actors Guild, but you don't have to have a union electrician, for example, every time you want to move a light. Low budget movies like mine had to cut corners to make a profit. One of the best ways was to keep the unions out of the mix.

"Pretty much," he said. "You want to go over the shooting script?"

"Sure," I agreed, accepting a copy from him. I knew the story well. After all, I had written it. It was the typical low budget stuff. The story revolved around a gang of toughs who had taken over a truck stop in a small Midwestern town. The hero—I had signed a former NFL linebacker for the part—was going to team up with a saucy heroine—Janice. She was to be a waitress in the truck stop who falls for the hero and helps him beat the bad guys. There would be lots of explosions, a fair amount of blood, a great rape scene where the waitress's best friend gets gang banged, and of course, a long steamy love scene between Janice and the hero. I had decided to make it a really steamy scene. It would be one of the scenes I showed potential distributors. The film wasn't a challenge. I had made at least half a dozen just like it. In fact, I had written this one over a weekend when I was about half-stoned.

I put a cigarette in my mouth, but Apollo grabbed it before I could light it.

"Hey, what's the idea?" I yelled.

“You can’t smoke on board,” Apollo explained. “It bothers some of the equipment on the plane.”

“Bullshit.”

“No, it’s true,” he insisted. “I think you noticed this plane is a little different.”

“Yeah. So?”

“So to get the speed we need to get there in ninety minutes, we need to keep the cabin pressurized differently,” he told me. “It has a higher oxygen content. Your cigarette might cause a nasty explosion.”

I shuddered. I didn’t understand a word he was telling me, except that somehow, we were flying a lot faster than a commercial airliner and if I lit a match, we were going to be flying toast. “You gotta be shittin’ me. Where the hell did you get this plane anyway?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I know the owner. Don’t worry, though. It’s safe. Shall we go over the script?”

I settled back into my seat. Damn! I could really use a smoke, I thought. Or something. I wondered if Apollo had packed any nose candy in my bag. He’d better have. I hated to think of being stuck in some little burg in the middle of nowhere without something to powder my nose with. Maybe I could get at the bag now.

“Don’t even think about it,” Apollo said suddenly.

I looked over at Janice. She was asleep, so he had to be addressing me. “What?”

“The coke,” Apollo explained. “There’s some in your luggage, but you can’t reach it now. The luggage is in a locked compartment that can only be accessed from outside.”

“What makes you think I was thinking about the coke?” I asked him, truly curious. Sometimes, Apollo could be downright spooky.

“You were licking your lips,” he told me. “You do it whenever you think you need coke. And by the way, you’ve been licking your lips a lot lately.”

“Hey, Sunshine, I thought we were going to go over the script,” I said, trying to change the subject.

“Fine,” he agreed, relaxing in his seat as he looked down at the script.

That’s what I liked about Apollo, I thought as we looked over the script. He might not approve of what I did, but he never got too judgmental. When I mentioned that to him once, he had simply shrugged and told me that being judgmental was for others. It was funny, too, because he never touched drugs or smokes. Booze, sure—every now and then he’d take a glass of wine, but I never saw him drunk.

As we paged through the script of Road Kill Babes—that was the tentative title of the flick—I had to pat myself on the back. It was better than most of the stuff I had written lately. Writing was actually my first love, but even in college, I seemed to show more promise as a director, so I had moved in that direction. My instructors said it was my artistic skills. I was pretty good at drawing, too, making more than one of them suggest I do art direction in films.

But I digress. The story was actually pretty tight. There was just enough sex to get the soft porn guys interested. We’d make two versions of the film. One would be for general cable and satellite distribution. That would be the version with lots of noise and violence. Then we’d throw a few more sex scenes in the longer version, call it the ‘Director’s Cut,’ and peddle it to video stores. What a business.

“Are you sure this Ovid will be right for the film?” I asked him. I wasn’t worried about what the locals thought of our little project. It would probably be like films I had made in some little towns on the fringes of LA. They would be flattered that their little hamlet was going to be in the movies. Everybody from the Mayor’s wife to the town slut would be lined up just to be extras in the film. From our reception, you would think I was James Cameron in to do the follow-up to *Titanic*. We’d be well out of town before they realized our cheesy little movie wouldn’t be shown on cable until long after these farm folks were in bed.

“The town is perfect,” Apollo told me, “except for the truck stop.”

“What do you mean ‘except for the truck stop’?” I asked. “Janice’s character works in a truck stop. That’s in the script.”

“Yeah, except we don’t use any trucks in the film—just bikes. Don’t worry—I found a bar that will be perfect for it, and it’ll cost us a lot less than a truck stop to rent,” he explained.

“How so?”

“Well, since a bar doesn’t pump gas, we won’t have to pay the owner for sales lost at the pump. And since we’ll get a lot of the filming done during the day, we won’t cut into sales much. I know the owner, so I got us a good deal.”

My eyes narrowed. I smelled a kickback. Not that it mattered, I supposed. So what if Apollo made a little on the side? If the location was right for the film, it didn’t matter. “Is there a big parking lot? We’ve got to have a big parking lot for the scene where Rex gets attacked by the bikers.”

Apollo smiled. He knew he had me. “The parking lot is huge, and it’s right on the highway. Trust me, Phil. This is a great location.”

“So when does the rest of the crew arrive?” I asked him. Or had I already asked him that? Jeez, I couldn’t remember jack shit. I had to start going easy on the wine. Or maybe the coke.

“Cast and crew will be in day after tomorrow,” he replied. “That gives us a day or so to scout out locations. Then we’ll have a week to shoot.”

It sounded good to me. In and out in a little over a week. I could take anything for that long—even a little Oklahoma town. I hoped there was enough coke in my bag, though. I hated to admit it, but Apollo was right. I had been powdering my nose a little too much of late. Yeah, I knew it wasn’t good for me, but somehow, I felt more in control when I took it. It allowed me to focus on the important shit and ignore the rest. At least that’s what I told myself.

By the time we had finished going through the script, I could hear the engines changing pitch and felt the plane dropping slightly. Apollo saw

the alarm in my eyes. "Don't worry, Phil, the landing will be just as smooth as the takeoff."

It was, too. In fact, Janice slept through the whole thing. I guessed I wore her out the night before. She needed her sleep. Well, she'd get her reward. She was a fairly decent actress as exotic actresses went, although that wasn't saying much. And she was great in the sack. A film like *Road Kill Babes* was about as far into respectability as her career would ever go. Maybe some young stud with a lot of money and an inexplicable desire to marry a 'movie star' would notice her and take her off my hands. That's what happened to most girls like Janice. Either that or prostitution. I supposed there wasn't a lot of difference sometimes.

The plane came to a complete stop and the hatch opened, seemingly automatically.

"Great flight," I told Apollo. "May I should thank the pilot for a smooth ride."

"I'll thank him for you," Apollo said smoothly. "He'll be a little busy for a while."

We stepped off the plane and into the bright Midwestern sunlight. The air was hot and sticky, and unlike California, there was no gentle sea breeze to stir it around. I could feel perspiration coating my body. What a lousy place to make a movie, I thought to myself. Welcome to Hickville, USA.

There was no terminal at the airport. It appeared to be strictly a private field, with a couple of hangars housing what seemed to be modest private planes. Our bird was by far the most impressive airplane on the tarmac.

A young man in jeans and a red T-shirt that had 'Oklahoma Sooners' emblazoned on it in white was removing our luggage from the belly of the plane and placing it in the trunk of a white Ford Taurus. Great, I thought. The best Apollo could do was a lousy Ford. I missed my Beemer. Then I took a closer look at the man. There seemed to be something wrong about him. It was almost as if he was transparent. It

couldn't be, I realized. It had to be a trick of the heat compounded by the illegal substances still not flushed out of my bloodstream.

At least the car was air conditioned, I noted as I slumped into the back seat, Janice sliding in next to me. She looked as if she had been dropped on an alien world. Janice was even more of a city kid than I was. Raised in LA, she had never been in the wide open spaces before. She obviously didn't know what to think about it. Well, I thought with a chuckle, there were a lot of things Janice didn't know what to think about.

Apollo slid behind the wheel. "We're lucky—the weather can be pretty nasty this time of year."

"And this isn't nasty?" I growled, thinking that it was only June and yet it was uncomfortably hot and sticky. I would have bet that by the Fourth of July, they could cook hot dogs just by placing them in the sun on the sidewalk.

"I'm talking about storms," he explained, slipping the car in gear. "We were lucky we didn't have any storms flying in today."

"Storms?"

"Sure," he said easily. "You know, this part of the Midwest gets some huge thunderstorms this time of year. A lot of them produce tornadoes."

"Yeah, I know," I agreed uncomfortably. I had seen *Twister*, and come to think of it, that had been filmed in Oklahoma. "Look, you don't think we'll have anything like a tornado here, do you?"

"No," he laughed. "Scared?"

"Of course not," I lied. "I'm just worrying about anything that might upset our shooting schedule. You're sure there's no chance of storms?"

"Not in Ovid," he replied confidently. "We're protected."

Protected? I wondered what he meant by that. I supposed it had something to do with topography. I seemed to remember hearing

someplace that some areas tended to have less chance of the violent winds than others. I hoped he was right. I didn't like storms any more than I liked flying. I think it was because both were pretty much out of my control. That's why I had chosen directing over other paths like writing, even though I was probably best at writing. When I was directing, I was in control. I hated the idea of being out of control.

We drove into Ovid, and to say that I wasn't impressed would be like saying water wasn't dry. As a city kid growing up on the coast, I had only seen places like Ovid from the First Class section of an airliner at thirty-five thousand feet. From there, they appeared as neat little grids of squared blocks with one or two main streets and a lot of nondescript houses surrounded by trees. Up close, it looked about the same. As we approached, I could see only a couple of buildings poking above the taller trees, and they appeared to be no more than three stories tall. We were met at first by a collection of metal business buildings with stucco fronts and signs that proclaimed them to be such things as Ovid Well Digging Services and Ovid Farm Implements. There were a couple of car lots and some little fast food joints, the most prominent of which was Rusty's Burger Barn. Hell, I thought, that place is probably the closest thing they have to a five star restaurant.

"Are you sure you grew up here?" I asked Apollo as he pulled up in front of a modest motel that declared itself to be the Ovid Inn.

"Well, I wasn't here very long," he admitted. "My parents moved around a lot."

"That explains it," I muttered. There was nothing about Apollo—even his name—that smacked of a small farm town upbringing. When I had first met him, I had assumed he was, like me, a Californian through and through. It was hard for me to imagine him sauntering down the streets of Ovid on a sultry afternoon. Of course, if he did, I'm sure all the little farm girls would have been wetting their panties just to get a smile from him. Hell, the California girls did.

Reluctantly, I stepped back out into the Ovid heat. It wasn't quite as bad in town as it had been at the airport. More trees, I supposed, to keep it cool. Or maybe I was just getting used to it. I hoped not. The

only thing I wanted out of Ovid was out of Ovid. We'd try to shoot the picture in seven days and get out.

The lobby of the Ovid Inn was as nondescript as the rest of the place. It consisted of a bulletin board with the names of local restaurants and attractions, a couple of cheap chairs that looked to be about one step above metal folding chairs, and a reception desk, clean except for a pen, a bell, and a name plate that read 'Z Proctor, Proprietor.' There was no one at the desk, but from a room behind, I could hear the sound of a television blaring over the soft hum of a window air conditioner. I found myself wishing the air conditioner were in the reception area, as it was hot and stuffy.

Apollo rang the bell while Janice and I wilted into the two chairs. In a short time, a tall, wiry man about forty with graying hair, thin on top, and a bushy little moustache meandered out of the back room. All at once, his face broke into a smile. "Well, Apollo, haven't seen you in a coon's age. Where have you been?"

"California," Apollo answered with a disarming grin. "Been doing a little surfing and making a few movies, Zach."

Well, now I knew what the 'Z' stood for. And was it my imagination, or had Apollo picked up a little Oklahoma twang?

The proprietor looked us over. "So how many rooms will you all need?"

"Just one," Apollo replied. "My two friends here will be staying together. I'll be staying out with my dad."

I hadn't realized Apollo's father still lived in Ovid. I supposed his dad would be somewhere on my payroll, too. That was the way things went when you produced movies. There was more nepotism in the movie business than anywhere else I could think of.

"I got a great room for you folks," Zach said. "The beds are something special."

"None of that, Zach," Apollo cautioned. "Just give them normal rooms."

I looked questioningly at Apollo. "Trust me on this one," he said.

"Well, all right," the proprietor agreed, pulling out two keys. "Room one seventeen. It's on this level two doors down from the Coke machine."

Apollo took the keys with another smile. "Thanks, Zach."

Apollo pulled the car up in front of the room, right next to a police car with 'City of Ovid' emblazoned in black on the front doors. City my ass, I thought. There was a cop standing next to the car, lean and alert. He wore mirrored sunglasses that hid his eyes, and his blue uniform shirt was creased with military precision. He looked almost like a Marine standing on the parade ground as he watched us walk up to the car. Apollo nodded a friendly greeting to the cop as he unlocked the trunk, and the cop nodded back without a word.

"Friend of yours?" I asked him under my breath as I pulled my bag out of the trunk.

"An old friend," Apollo confirmed quietly.

"Then what..."

I never got to finish asking the question. I was going to ask what the cop was doing just standing there watching us unload. But as I started to ask, disaster struck. One of the compartments in my suitcase was unzipped, and a small, clear plastic bag containing about half a pound of snow-white powder dropped to the asphalt with a discernible plop.

Shit, I thought to myself as I watched the cop's eyes move purposefully from my face to the object on the ground. I had to make it look as if nothing was wrong. Maybe he hadn't realized what the bag contained. After all, this was a small town. I knew even small towns had a drug problem, but maybe he wouldn't recognize it as a bag of cocaine. I had no choice but to bluff my way through it.

"What's in the bag, sir?" the cop said calmly. His voice was as strong and authoritative as any LA cop's.

"Oh, that?" I said, I hoped equally calmly. "That's just special body powder. You know, to cool the skin? I have it specially blended for me." No city cop would have bought that, but I was hoping he knew

who we were and would believe movie people were just strange enough to have body powder blended especially for them.

He put out his hand. "May I see it?"

"It's just body powder," I told him, unwilling to relinquish the bag. My heart was pounding. Two decades of cocaine use without a single incident, and I was about to be busted by a tank town cop.

"May I see it?" he repeated with just a bit more menace in his tone. Reluctantly, I handed him the bag. He hefted it in his hand, finally opening the zip-lock top and dipping his finger into the substance. He lifted the finger to his tongue, placing a small amount there.

He looked up at me. "Interesting body powder. You should tell whoever makes it for you that cocaine is an illegal substance. He should find a substitute."

"Look, officer," I said, reaching slowly for the wallet in my rear pocket, taking it out carefully so he could see it wasn't a threat. "I'm sure we can work something out."

"Look, Phil," Apollo whispered, "that's not a good idea with Officer Mercer."

"Are you trying to bribe me?" this Officer Mercer asked.

"Oh, no," I said quickly. "I just thought you would need some identification." I handed him the wallet. "You see, we're here to make a movie and..."

"I'm going to have to ask you to come with me," he said, opening the back door of the police car and motioning me into the caged backseat. "You, too, Miss," he said with a nod to Janice.

"Why me?" she squealed. "It was his suitcase. There's nothing in my suitcase. I mean, there's no drugs." She looked worried, but I doubted if any of the little sex toys she always carried in her bag were illegal in Ovid. Still, there was no telling. This was the Bible Belt. Maybe just being from California was illegal here.

"Please, both of you, get in." It was more than a request. Somehow, it

was an order which had to be obeyed. We both slid into the rear seat together. I think we were both more frightened than we had ever been before.

“Apollo,” I yelled, “get us a lawyer and meet us.”

“I will,” he promised. As we drove away, I wondered suddenly why the cop hadn’t hauled Apollo in, too. Then I remembered that Apollo was from Ovid. Maybe this dad of his was a prominent figure. Cops never liked to pick up relatives of prominent people in any town large or small. Maybe his dad could help us. Suddenly, I wasn’t quite as worried. With any luck at all, we’d be free in a couple of hours and back to making a movie. I had a lot of locations to scout before the rest of the crew and cast arrived.

We drove further into town along what appeared to be the main highway business street, populated with gas stations, fast food restaurants, and even a small strip shopping center. There was even a place called Randy Andy’s, which appeared to be a small strip club. Although it was only mid afternoon, there were already a few cars and pickup trucks parked in front of the place. I suspected this was the place Apollo had chosen for our film’s heroine to be working in. My director’s mind went into high gear, sizing up the property. Yes, it should work. It was just sleazy enough that it should work.

Then I started noticing something really weird about Ovid. I saw several people walking down the broad sidewalks of Ovid on that sultry afternoon. Some looked as normal as could be. Others, though, had that same almost transparent appearance as the guy who had helped us with our luggage at the airport.

I nudged Janice as we stopped at a stop light. “Look at those kids,” I told her, motioning to three young girls in shorts and T-shirts who were waiting to cross the street. “Notice anything odd about them?”

She peered at them for a moment. “Aren’t they a little young for you?” she asked. “I mean, Jeez, Phil. They don’t even have boobs yet.”

“Not that,” I growled in frustration. “Look at them. I mean, really look at them.”

She did, her brow furrowing. Thinking had never appeared to be Janice's strong suit. "So? They're kids—little girls. What else am I supposed to see?"

Our car pulled away, and I slumped down into the seat. Maybe my doctor was right. He said I wasn't taking care of myself. Too much booze and drugs. Maybe I was starting to hallucinate.

Finally, we came upon a gray granite building with Doric columns in front. The words 'City Hall' were carved into the granite above the columns. It looked like every other small town city hall I had ever seen in the movies. There was what I presumed to be a state flag flying next to the American flag. That and a few flowers growing in a bed next to the well-manicured lawn next to the parking lot gave the place a little color. Other than that, the whole place was drab gray.

"Come with me," Officer Mercer said, opening the back door for us. We followed him into the building. Although it was mid afternoon and we were obviously in a police station, there appeared to be no other officers present. I expected to be taken into an office where I would be advised of my rights and given the opportunity to see a lawyer. No such luck, though. I was suddenly aware that he was taking us into a small block of neat, gray cells.

"Now wait a minute!" I barked, coming to a halt. Janice, who had been clutching me fearfully practically fell down when she collided with me. "You can't just throw us into a cell. We have our rights."

I gritted my teeth as Officer Mercer gave me the faintest of smiles. "You're in Ovid now," he said, as if that somehow explained everything.

"I don't care where we are," I argued. "This is still the United States. You can't just throw us in jail. We have laws in this country."

His smile was wider now.

Suddenly, I felt my legs begin to move. I hadn't tried to move them. In fact, I had been determined to stop where I was. Let him try to move me. Then I would have a case for police brutality. But for some

reason, I had begun walking toward the cell. I tried to stop, but it was if I was only an observer in my own body. I tried to yell in protest, but my voice seemed to be useless as well.

I could still turn my head. I saw Janice, a terrified look on her face, slowly walking into the cell next to mine. There were fearful tears streaming down her cheeks, and I could tell she had no more control over her body than I did. Then, I lost control of my head as well. I was forced to look straight ahead at the uncomfortable cot bolted to the wall along the far side of the cell. I walked to the cot and sat down, completely unable to stop myself.

“You should be comfortable here,” Officer Mercer said to us. “Your trial will be at ten in the morning. Rest well until then.”

With a sudden grunt, I realized my voice had been restored. “You can’t do this!” I yelled at the retreating footsteps. “Wait until my lawyer gets finished with you!”

Of course, my lawyer was fifteen hundred miles away—maybe more. I had to hope that Apollo would be able to get me a local lawyer. That would probably be better anyway, I realized. A local lawyer could schmooze the Judge and maybe get us off. I mean, who was to say I knew about the drugs? I would just claim someone put them there without my knowledge. I would agree to pay a hefty fine. Then I had to get back to work. We were going to make Ovid famous, after all. Their little town would be in the movies. How much of a fine would they need? Five thousand? Ten thousand? Fifty thousand? It didn’t matter. I’d pay it. I would just take it out of the film budget somewhere. All I had to do was wait until Apollo showed up with a lawyer.

“Phil, I’m scared,” Janice whimpered from the next cell. “What did he do to us?”

Yeah, I thought, remembering suddenly how I had been marched into the cell. How did he do that to us? Hypnosis? I supposed it was possible. What else could it have been? I had been determined not to march into the cell—yet I had. Sure, it had to be hypnosis, I told myself. If it wasn’t hypnosis, it would have to be magic, and everybody knew

there was no such thing—right?

I sighed. At least the cell was clean. I bounced up and down on the cot. It was actually fairly comfortable. Well, it wasn't the first time I had been in jail for drugs. There was that time five years earlier in Mexico when I ended up in jail. Take my word for it—the worst US jail has got to be better than the best Mexican jail. As I thought about it, it had only taken a thousand US currency to get out of that jam. That is, a thousand plus the cops kept all my coke.

“Phil?”

It was Apollo's voice. “Back here, Sunshine,” I called happily.

Suddenly, there he was in front of my cell, a wide grin on his face.

“What the hell are you grinning at?” I snapped.

“It's just good to see you,” he explained, wrapping his hands around the bars. “Your lawyer will be here in the morning before trial.”

“Now wait a minute,” I said. “That would mean we have to stay in jail overnight. What happened to bail?”

“No bail in Ovid,” he told me. “The Judge won't allow it. He doesn't believe in it. He always says swift justice is the best alternative to bail.”

“Swift my ass,” I growled. “If I gotta stay here overnight, it isn't swift enough. Who is this Judge anyway?”

Apollo thought for a moment. “Well, let's just say he runs things around here. I'd better warn you, he doesn't like drugs. By the way, you've never dealt drugs, have you?”

I puffed up to my full six one height to face Apollo. “Who do you think I am? Of course I've never dealt drugs. I've been generous to my friends, but I've never charged anyone a penny.”

“That's good,” he said with a nod. “In that case, you'll probably be okay. If you had ever dealt drugs, things would go badly for you.”

“Things are going badly now,” I observed. “I don't see how they could

go much worse.”

“Oh, they could,” he said with a grin as he pushed away from the cell door. “Take my word for it, things could be a lot worse.”

“Hey, wait!” I yelled, but he had moved out of my line of sight.

“Who are you talking to?” Janice asked meekly from the next cell.

“Apollo,” I told her. “Didn’t you see him?”

“No.”

How had she missed him? He had to walk right past her cell. I was starting to get worried. There was something that went well beyond strange going on in Ovid, and we seemed to be right at the center of it. I was starting to think only the Judge, whoever he was, would have the answers.

At least they fed us well. Dinner was delivered to our cells. It consisted of a small steak, some French fries, and a slice of homemade cake. The steak was incredible, but there was no file in the cake.

Of most interest to me, though, was the girl who delivered the meal through the slot in the bars was one of those transparent people. I stared impolitely at her as she handed me the tray. She noticed, looking up at me in puzzlement.

“Is something wrong, Mister?”

Her voice sounded normal. For that matter, she looked normal. She was just an average looking girl, slim, reasonably well built, with brown hair and a few freckles. She wore a plaid short-sleeved shirt and jeans, and if it weren’t for her slight transparency, I wouldn’t have been able to describe her five minutes after she left the jail.

“I... ah... was just wondering,” I began uncertainly. “Has anybody ever told you that they could... well, see through you? I don’t mean really see through you, but...”

She looked down nervously, checking to see if her shirt was properly buttoned.

“I don’t mean like that,” I said, trying to clarify my question.

She looked at me in confusion. It was obvious that she didn’t have the slightest notion what I was talking about. She looked solid enough. I mean, she was able to lift my dinner tray without a problem. And it wasn’t as if she was ghost-like. It was just that if I concentrated very hard, I could almost see what was directly behind her.

“Look, I’m sorry,” I finally said. “I just meant that...”

She looked up at me with a grin. “Oh, you just wanted to make me think the twins were peeking out.”

“The twins?”

“Sure,” she said with a grin as she bounced slightly to make her breasts bounce up and down. “I heard all about you. You’re that friend of Apollo’s who makes movies. You thinking about putting somebody like me in your movie?”

Another time and another place, the conversation would have probably led to an interesting evening. We each would have gotten what we wanted. I would have gotten laid, and she would have ended up with a walk-on so she could brag to all of her friends that she knew a famous director who put her in one of his films. Hey, I wasn’t the only sleazy director to play my part in that story. It had been going on since Edison opened his first studio back in New Jersey. It probably even went back a lot further than that. Gee, Mr. Shakespeare, what would I have to do to get a part in your play? Of course, come to think of it, boys played the parts of girls then. Well, maybe old Willie liked boys. Who knew?

Well, there were steel bars between me and the would-be starlet, so all I could do was say, “Show up on the set and I’ll see what I can do.”

That made her happy, and she bounced away happy. I wondered what she would look like on screen. Would she look normal or transparent? With a shudder, I wondered if she would even show up at all.

“Are you okay, Janice?” I asked as I hungrily wolfed down my dinner.

“I’m not talking to you,” she replied quietly.

“Why not?” I managed to say over another bite of steak.

“You got me into this mess with your drugs,” she replied.

“It seems to me you always use some of them,” I pointed out.

“Yes, but they were in your luggage,” she responded, as if this somehow proved her point. Female logic, I thought. It had to be an oxymoron.

I actually got a good night’s sleep that night. There was something peaceful about the jail. It was quiet—none of the expected late-night drunks being rolled in to sleep it off. In fact, I didn’t hear a thing except for Janice moving around in her cell. Also, the cot was more comfortable than I thought. So, it wasn’t the Waldorf, but when Officer Mercer woke me up the next morning, I actually felt rested and ready to go. Besides, I thought to myself, my last drink had been on the plane and my last line of coke almost a day and a half ago. Come to think of it, I hadn’t had a smoke since California. Maybe all that had something to do with how I felt.

Janice and I were led to a small conference room near the cell block. Waiting for us was an attractive woman with papers spread out before her. She wore a powder blue suit and white silk blouse. Although sitting, I estimated her to be about five six or seven with a nice figure and cute face, surrounded by long, well-styled brown hair. As she looked up at us with a smile, I could tell she was wearing contacts. As a director, I could always tell that. Contacts force you to stare just a little bit more. One other thing about her—she wasn’t transparent.

“Hi, I’m Susan Jager,” she said pleasantly with just a trace of the ever-present Oklahoma twang, rising to offer us a well-manicured hand. I noticed as I took it that I had been right about both her height and her figure. “I’m your attorney—with your approval of course.”

Janice took her hand with reserve, sizing Susan up like one wildcat studying another. Of course, Susan was everything that Janice wasn’t. Susan was a trained professional, obviously intelligent and

sophisticated. Janice was... well, Janice was Janice. I found myself wondering if Susan was as great in bed as Janice. Janice might have had her there. Then again, maybe not.

"I'm sure you'll be fine," I replied enthusiastically. It was no act. What Judge in the world could help but be impressed with someone like Susan? She was the answer to my prayers. She was a local attorney, she was attractive, and I had a gut feeling she knew her stuff. A woman like her was wasted in a burg like Ovid.

"Then let's get down to business," she said a little primly, taking her seat once more. "Mr. Malone, these are very serious charges."

I leaned back in one of the chairs. "Oh come now, Susan—may I call you Susan?"

She nodded.

"A lot of people use drugs," I went on. "It isn't as if this were heroin or something. It's just plain old coke. Why, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that half of Congress uses this stuff. It's a recreational drug and I don't have to steal to pay for it. Surely that can't be that serious here."

"Have you ever sold drugs?" she asked quietly.

"Sold? Of course not. I make movies for a living; I don't deal in drugs."

"Be careful now," she cautioned. "The Judge will know if you're lying. If you've ever dealt in drugs, I need to know right now."

I leaned forward. "Ms. Jager—Susan—I have never in my life sold drugs." Of course I had provided them to my cast upon occasion, but I had never sold them. Come to think of it, Apollo had asked the same question. Apparently this Judge was a real hard ass when it came to drug dealers.

"All right, then we have a fighting chance," she concluded.

Janice frowned. "A chance for what?" she asked nervously.

"A chance to make sure you are still human at the end of the day," Susan said. As I started to speak, she raised her hand to stop me.

"Don't ask now. We have to be in court in just a few minutes. For your

own well being, though, I caution you, this court is not like any court you have ever seen before. The law in Ovid works a little differently. Be respectful—very, very respectful—and tell only the truth. I'll do what I can for you, but if you annoy the Judge, my hands will be tied and you could be in grave danger. Do you both understand?"

I don't think either of us had any inkling of what she was saying, except for the part about being in grave danger. And what the hell was she talking about when she said that bit about being human at the end of the day?

Then I remembered a movie I had made a few years back. It was called 'Magicmaster.' It was the story of a wizard who could change men into beasts. I marketed it directly to Cinemax. They eat that sort of crap up. The X-rated version was called 'Lustmaster's Magic'. Is that what Ovid was all about? Come on, Phil, I told myself, that kind of crap only happens in the movies. I wouldn't have imagined such a thing a day before, but I had seen and even touched transparent people. There was something very odd about Ovid. I resolved to follow Susan's advice.

The courtroom looked like the courtroom I had used in 'Justice Takes a Holiday.' It was really pretty well done for a small town. Either there was big money in Ovid or the Judge had a lot of clout. The room was empty of spectators, though, except for a cute blonde who sat demurely in the last row of the visitor's gallery. Nice legs, I thought as I walked past her. I gave her a smile which was pleasantly returned.

"Who's she?" I asked Susan as we settled into comfortable chairs at the defense table.

Susan laughed, "Oh, that's Cindy—Cindy Patton. I don't think you want anything to do with her. She's married with two kids."

"Married, huh?" Janice jabbed my shoulder angrily. Now, to be honest, I wasn't really interested in this Cindy. Since I had met Janice, I had become a one-girl guy—at least most of the time.

"She's also the Judge's assistant," Susan told me.

“All rise!”

I looked up, surprised to see Officer Mercer acting as bailiff. He’s playing a dual part, I thought. Maybe Ovid didn’t have a very big budget after all.

The Judge was fairly impressive. If I had been casting for a Judge, I would have been happy to pick this one. He was middle aged—forty-five or fifty—with mostly brown hair accented by an occasional touch of gray. He wore gold-framed glasses which gave him a distinguished, almost scholarly appearance. His black robe was neatly pressed, and the shirt cuffs showing out of its sleeves were crisp and brilliantly white.

“Be seated,” he ordered as he sat. His voice was deep and commanding. I was duly impressed.

From the bench, the Judge shuffled purposely through a small sheaf of papers. “Officer Mercer, what is the first case to come before the court today?”

“We have a drug possession case, your honor,” he intoned formally.

“Ah, yes,” the Judge agreed. “We have the People versus Phillip Malone on a charge of drug possession and a Ms. Miriam Finklestein as accessory to drug possession.”

I looked at Janice who was wincing. That was her real name? Miriam Finklestein?

“Your Honor!” Susan broke in.

“Yes, Ms. Jager?”

“Your Honor, I am not aware of an accessory charge that can relate to drug possession,” she explained.

To my surprise, the Judge actually smiled. I could tell he actually liked Susan. I wondered if she was giving him a little on the side.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he said finally. “Officer Mercer, I’m surprised at you. You’ve brought this young lady up on a non-existent charge.”

Officer Mercer showed no change of expression as the Judge went on, “Ms. Finklestein—or if you prefer, Ms. Lamuse—will you please approach the bench.”

Nervously, but with visible relief that apparently no charges would be brought against her, Janice walked meekly to face the Judge, Susan at her side.

“Ms. Lamuse,” the Judge began, “what is your IQ?”

“Uh... my IQ, Your Honor?”

The Judge nodded. “Yes, my dear—your Intelligence Quotient.”

“Uh... one hundred and eighty, Your Honor.”

I nearly fell out of my chair. Janice was a genius? My Janice? The girl who could orgasm on command in front of a camera? The girl that had never uttered an intelligent thought in my presence was a mental marvel? It couldn't be!

“Yet you have chosen as a career being a pornographic actress,” the Judge mused. “Could you explain why?”

“Well,” Janice began, “I guess I just thought this was what was expected of me. I mean, I was a blonde with big ti... breasts and all. And I could memorize lines and deliver them well, so...”

“And you had a father who didn't think much of women,” the Judge continued for her. “In fact, he even told you that women were only good for one thing, didn't he?”

“Yes,” Janice murmured.

“And he showed you what that one thing was on a number of occasions before you were even out of high school, didn't he?”

“Yes,” Janice agreed, her head hanging low.

This was a Janice I had never seen before. I had no idea that she was so smart, or that her father had taken advantage of her. What a prick! If he were standing in front of me, I thought, I'd kick him in the balls for what he had done to his daughter. Hey, I wasn't perfect, but guys like

her father made me want to puke.

The Judge apparently was having similar thoughts. "It is too bad that your father is no longer living," he told her. "I would enjoy dispensing justice to such a man. But that isn't possible. Now, we must deal with what he has done. Now, Ms. Lamuse, consider carefully your answer to my next questions. Cocaine was found in the suitcase of Mr. Malone. Did you have any reason to suspect that it was there?"

There was a heavy silence before Janice finally replied meekly, "Yes, Your Honor."

"And do you use cocaine, Ms. Lamuse?"

Susan looked ready to say something, but she bit her tongue and remained silent.

"Yes, Your Honor," Janice replied.

"Then by all rights, since you shared a room with Mr. Malone, you were in possession of the drugs as well."

"I guess so, Your Honor," Janice said with a small sigh.

I had to give it to him, he knew his stuff. I could see Susan looking a bit crestfallen. She had almost gotten her client off, but the Judge had found another avenue to make the charge stick. Susan had been right. This Judge was a dangerous character.

"Don't worry, Ms. Lamuse," the Judge said gently. "Justice in Ovid is not without compassion where compassion is deserved." Then, he did something unexpected. He began to chant. It sounded like Latin, but it could have been anything, I suppose. Languages were never my strong suit. Whatever it was, it seemed to have a noticeable effect on Janice. Her body began to shimmer until it had become somewhat indistinct. Then, it began to grow smaller and darker. Where a buxom blonde had stood moments before, a brunette, somewhat flat-chested of no more than fifteen or so now was in her place, and she seemed to be slowly growing still smaller.

"So, what do you want to be when you grow up, Stephanie?" the Judge asked, looking down at the new girl.

“A nurse!” the girl who had been Janice said in a childish voice, sounding no more than five or so. She swayed back and forth, as little girls do.

“A nurse, eh?” the Judge said. “But you’re very smart, Stephanie. Have you ever thought about being a doctor?”

Janice was smaller still, no more than ten now as a thoughtful look crossed her face. “No...”

The Judge smiled. The little girl that Janice had become was smaller still—perhaps six or seven, wearing a pink T-shirt, white shorts, and sandals. She was not an unattractive little girl, but it was obvious that she would never grow up to be the bombshell Janice had been. “Well, you should,” he said. “You know, you’re a very smart little girl, Stephanie.”

Janice—no, Stephanie—giggled.

“There you are!” a voice called from the back of the courtroom. I turned to see a rather plain woman, somewhat transparent and dressed in an outfit not unlike Stephanie’s, rushing toward the bench. “Oh, Judge, I’m so sorry. Was Stephanie bothering you?”

“Not at all,” the Judge said smoothly. “Stephanie and I were just talking about what she wants to do when she grows up.”

“The Judge said I should be a doctor!” the little girl told her happily.

The woman squatted down to face the little girl. “Well, you’re certainly smart enough,” she agreed. “You’ll need to study very, very hard, though.”

“Oh, I will, Mommy!” the little girl agreed, smiling. Then, back to the Judge, “I’m going to be in second grade next fall.”

The Judge smiled. “Come by any time, Stephanie.”

“Thank you!” she said cheerfully, taking the woman’s hand and skipping merrily out of the room.

I was dumbfounded. I had just seen something that looked as if it came out of one of Hollywood’s top special effects houses, and yet I

knew this was no special effect. The woman I had known and slept with for a long time had just been changed into a little girl who apparently had no memory of her previous life. Now I knew what Susan had been warning me about. The Judge had powers I had never dreamed possible. I was most certainly in grave danger. I sensed Janice had been dealt with lightly by the Judge's standards. Yet she had been changed beyond all recognition. Now it was going to be my turn.

"Mr. Malone!" the Judge intoned as the courtroom returned to normal—if anything could be said to be 'normal' about it.

"Yes, Your Honor," I managed to say, a quaver in my voice. I rose unsteadily to my feet. I could never remember being so frightened in my entire life.

The Judge motioned me forward with his hand. When I had managed reluctantly to stand in the place where my former lover had been transformed, he began, "Mr. Malone, you have been charged with bringing an illegal substance—drugs—into Ovid. Do you have any idea how serious that offense is?"

I didn't, but I was starting to get the idea.

"Let me tell you then," the Judge said, without waiting for an answer from me. "If you had been dealing drugs, you would forfeit your humanity, but I realize you are only a user. I also know that you see no harm in using them, or in using people like Janice Lamuse. You are a sleaze merchant, Mr. Malone."

I had to defend myself. "I'm just giving the public what they want, Your Honor," I explained.

His raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Is that important to you, Mr. Malone?"

"I've made it my life's work," I said, trying to sound proud of my accomplishments.

"As far as I'm concerned, Mr. Malone, your 'life's work' consists of one very good film—'A Night in Olympus'—and a subsequent parade of garbage," the Judge growled. "But who am I to argue with the public's

taste? Isn't that right, Mr. Malone?"

"The public pays the bills," I replied with a shrug.

"Yes, it does," the Judge said ominously. "I think I have just the thing for you, Mr. Malone. Allow me to introduce you to Marty Bachman."

I turned, following his eyes. "Pleased to meet you," a voice said with a thick, raspy Oklahoma drawl. I looked behind me and saw a man in black trousers and a blue and white striped shirt. He was tall and thin, and his hawk-like nose and receding hairline made me think of Ichabod Crane.

"You will be 'paroled' shall we say to Mr. Bachman." Then the Judge began that strange chanting again. I cringed, expecting changes to envelop my body, but when the chanting had stopped, nothing had changed. I could only feel a small tingle. "Good day to you, Mr. Malone."

The Judge rose from the bench and returned to his chambers. I looked questioningly at my attorney. She actually looked relieved.

"That's it?" I asked. I was so nervous my voice seemed to actually go up a register. "It's over?"

Susan shook her head. "No, it's just beginning, Mr. Malone. But don't worry. Things often turn out for the best. I'm still your attorney, no matter what happens. Remember that."

"Come on," Marty Bachman said, grabbing my arm and pulling me along. I nearly tripped and lost my shoe.

"What's happening?" I asked as he led me to a red Mustang convertible in the parking lot. "Why didn't he change me, too?"

He stopped and looked at me for a moment. Then he burst into laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"Look at yourself in the mirror," he told me.

I looked in the side mirror of the Mustang. I gasped as I realized that

my features were changing as I watched. My face had become smoother and less angular, and long, dark—almost black—hair was growing before my eyes. I held a hand to my face, alarmed to find that my hand was now slender, fingernails tipped with a frosted pink glaze.

“What the hell is happening to me?” I screamed. But I knew. I had seen what the Judge could do. If he could change Janice into a little girl, then he could change me into... into...

“Just get in the car, Sylvia,” he said. “I’ll explain everything.”

I turned to him. Moments ago, we had been the same height. I was several inches shorter now. “What... what did you call me?”

“Sylvia. Sylvia Conners. That’s your name now, so you’d better get used to it.”

Numbly, I crouched down into the car. Marty slid into the driver’s seat and started the car. I was too busy looking down at myself to see where we were going. My body was almost a blur, flesh moving and rearranging itself under my white dress shirt and gray slacks that I had been wearing since the day before. As I watched, they, too, began to shift. My shirt was becoming a black knit top with short sleeves and a low neckline that accentuated the two small mountains that were growing like weeds out of my chest. I could feel a sudden pressure as my waist dented inward, the leftover flesh pooling itself on my hips and ass. There was a tickling sensation as the legs of my slacks fused together, turned from gray to dark red, and began sliding up my legs.

“Don’t worry,” he said cheerfully as we drove down peaceful tree-lined streets. “It will be all done in a couple of minutes. Do you still remember who you were?”

“Yes,” I managed to say in a voice that was shockingly high in pitch.

“I’m Phil Malone.” I had to remember that. No matter what happened to me, I was Phil Malone. They couldn’t take away my identity like they did with Janice. Phil Malone. I’m Phil Malone. Phil Malone.

“No, babe, you were Phil Malone,” he chuckled. “You’re Sylvia Conners now. Or ‘Sly’ to your friends.”

Damn. That was the name of the Italian guy who wrote Rocky. Sly—Sylvester Stallone. Even in this, I would be constantly reminded of the failure that had started my downward slide.

“You know, you’re lucky,” Marty went on. “Most people just have to figure out for themselves what’s going on. You’ve got old Marty to help you, though. I’ll tell you everything you need to know to be Sylvia.”

The changes were nearly complete, I realized. Long, almost black hair hung over my newly narrowed shoulders. I could taste something sweet on my lips and realized I was wearing lipstick—and probably a whole lot more, I thought. My breasts were now full sized—or at least I hoped they were, for they stuck out what seemed like a mile from my chest. My dark red skirt came up to mid thigh, leaving my long legs exposed to show dark nylons which went all the way down to a pair of red heels that had to be at least three inches.

“Not bad,” Marty said, looking at me as the changes ended with the appearance of imitation gold bracelets at my wrists and the tug of fairly large hoop earrings at my ears. “You’re not exactly what I had in mind, but I guess you’ll do.”

“Do for what?” I gasped. I couldn’t help it. I touched my breasts and crotch, feeling for the first time the sensitive tips of my nipples and experiencing the feeling of loss as I realized there was nothing male left of my crotch.

“You work for me now,” he replied.

Doing what? I wondered. Was I a whore? Was he my pimp? There was no way in the world that I was going to go down on some guy. I’d die first!

“I’ve got a little place out on the highway,” he went on with a distinctive leer. “It’s called Randy Andy’s. You’ll be one of my girls now.”

“Is it... a strip joint?” I managed to ask.

That brought on a wave of laughter. “No. I wish it were, but there’s no way the Judge would allow that in his precious Ovid. No, it’s just a bar. Your job will be waitressing. It’s mostly drinks, but we serve lunch and

dinner. You'll pick it up pretty quickly. The job pays minimum wage, but you keep all your tips. That means the more you swing that cute little ass of yours, the more you'll make. No whoring, though. The Judge doesn't allow any of that, either."

"Whoring!" I practically yelled. "What do you think I am anyway?"

"You're a nineteen-year-old girl with a fake ID that says you're twenty one. That lets you work for me," he said with a grin. "Like it or not, you've got all the plumbing of a nineteen-year-old girl, and that plumbing will be in prime condition. Somebody like you will be tempted to sell that plumbing for good money."

"Why would I want to do that?" I asked indignantly.

"Because the old you has been selling sex for money for a long time, babe," he told me. "I know. I've got most of your movies on tape. Or I did have them. They're probably all gone by now."

That almost disturbed me more than my transformation. "What do you mean they're gone?"

"When you changed, the world changed, too," he explained. "Phil Malone never existed. If you were able to leave Ovid now, you'd find that no one outside had ever heard of Phil Malone. We remember here in Ovid, but even that's not enough to save your movies. Of course, I'll bet the Judge still has a copy of 'A Night in Olympus.' He loves that stupid movie."

I felt faint. This just wasn't possible, I thought. I remembered my entire life as Phil Malone. I remembered growing up, making movies, making love, and doing a thousand other things. Could they really all be gone now—just shadow memories of a reality only I and beings like Marty could recall? And what of who I had become? I looked down at myself. There was a cheap black purse propped against the seat.

"Go ahead—open it," he urged.

I did. There were the usual female possessions—a tube of lipstick, a compact, several tissues, and an imitation leather wallet, well worn and quite thin. Inside the wallet were a few ones and a five, totalling

not more than fifteen dollars, and a driver's license made out to a Sylvia Jean Conners. It indicated that I was a twenty-one year old female, but as Marty had told me, the age was phony. I was really only nineteen. I suppose I should have been happy on one hand. I had regained over thirty years of life. No more middle-aged aches and pains for me. No, I was nineteen and in the full flower of youth. Of course, I had a slit between my legs now. I would have rather been a middle-aged man than a female of any age.

"Don't cry, babe—it'll ruin the makeup."

"I'm not crying!" I insisted. I wasn't either. My eyes were just squeezing out a few tears of frustration. This wasn't right. I had done nothing to deserve this. I was an American citizen. I had my rights.

"Take me back to see the Judge. I'll demand my old body back."

"Oh, that's rich!" Marty chortled as we pulled up in front of a wood-framed tavern situated in the middle of a large parking lot. "You'd better hope you never see the Judge again. If you do, you might be a bitch with four legs instead of two. If you think life is unpleasant now, imagine being a cocker spaniel for a while."

I didn't want to think about it. I looked around. There was a large neon sign just off the highway that said 'Randy Andy's.'

"Randy Andy's?"

He smiled. "Clever, don't you think? I came up with that myself."

I was going to be waitress at a place called Randy Andy's? Something told me I would need a baseball bat to fend off the clientele.

"C'mon, babe, I'll show you around," Marty said, leaping out of the car.

Leaping out of the car was out of the question for me. My skirt was tight enough to cut off circulation, and balancing on one heel to stand up was downright impossible. Then, I remembered how I had seen most women get out of a car. I swivelled around on my plumper ass and put both heeled feet on the ground at the same time. As I rose to my feet as a complete woman for the first time, I nearly fell over, not

used to the moving weights on my chest. Fortunately (if it could be called fortunate), my widened hips seemed to give a little counter balance to my body. It still wasn't easy to stand, but I managed. Marty got a good laugh out of my efforts. I saw nothing funny, though.

"I'm not sure I can walk in heels," I said nervously.

He grinned. "Get used to 'em, babe. All my waitresses wear them. It's required. It gives you that sexy wiggle when you walk. It makes all the guys want to stick around just to watch."

"I've got to be a waitress in heels?" I shouted. "Look, I can't do this."

"Yes, you can," he insisted. "You don't really have a choice. This is who you are. You don't have any marketable skills. As far as most of these farmers are concerned, you're just one more girl from the wrong side of the tracks. None of 'em would give you the time of day. You're lucky to be working for me. Without me, you'd be on welfare, and believe me, doll, a welfare check won't take you very far."

Was he right? Was I trapped in this role? In this town? I'd better just play along, I realized, until I figured things out.

I was relieved to find the bar was actually fairly clean. Of course, I realized suddenly it was probably women like me who kept it that way. There were two rooms. The first consisted of a long bar with cheap stools padded in dark blue or black plastic. The few tables were along the opposite wall, leaving a wide aisle in between. The second room was actually a little larger. It consisted of more tables, some booths along the far wall, and a large pool table lit by a fancy pool table light advertising Coors Beer.

"Your shift starts at eleven," Marty told me, "and ends at midnight. You get a break from one to four."

Thanks a lot, I thought. That meant I had an eight-hour day with three hours in between. What kind of a life was that? What was I supposed to do during the three-hour break?

"You get Sundays off," he went on as if this was a fantastic company benefit. "We're closed Sundays."

He showed me around the place, acquainting me with my new duties. I couldn't help but think of all the pictures I had made that took place in a little bar like this one. Hell, the picture I had come to Ovid to make was supposed to be filmed in a bar—probably this one, or one very much like it. I always had sleazy girls waiting on tables in those pictures. They usually had big tits and low IQs and liked to show off both. They almost always got laid by the end of the first reel.

Holy shit! I thought. Is that what was going to happen to me? Was that what I had become? As Marty explained the operation of the bar, I stared into the mirror behind the bar at my new visage. Well, I certainly had the big tits. They were out front for everybody to see. As for my IQ, I didn't seem to have lost any points there. I still thought like Phil Malone. Now as for the rest of my body, sure, I was attractive. I had a nice figure and pretty long, dark hair. But the rest of the package? Well, my face was okay, but not great. I had a fairly good tan, but there were a fair number of silky black hairs on the back of my arms, and my face was a little too angular and my nose a little too straight to be considered beautiful. I was fine in the leg department, but my hips were a little wide. In other words, I was small town attractive, but hardly the kind of girl I would have picked to play a sleazy waitress in a bar.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah," I lied.

Marty studied me for a moment. "Well, pay attention, because we open at ten. That's just five minutes from now. And don't expect to be paid for your first hour. Usually, I'll expect you here at eleven. This is just your orientation period."

I winced at the word 'period,' realizing that would take on new meaning for me now.

"Morning, boss." I turned to see a short, stocky Hispanic man in a white T-shirt and white pants. He had long black hair neatly tied into a ponytail and a thin black moustache. He was also transparent.

"Morning, Sly."

“Morning, Pepe,” Marty said easily. I numbly echoed his greeting.

“Best short order cook in Oklahoma,” Marty said to me in a low voice as Pepe disappeared into the kitchen behind the bar.

“What’s with the transparent people around here?” I managed to ask him when Pepe was gone.

“We call them shades,” he explained. “They’re real—as real as you and I—but they’re... different. You see, all the residents of Ovid fall into four categories. Some are transformed into their current roles and remember who they were—like you. Some are like your friend. They get transformed but don’t remember ever being anyone else. The transparent people are the ones we need to run the town, but the Judge hasn’t transformed anyone into them yet. There was a Sylvia Conners before you arrived, but she was a shade.”

“Where is she now?” I asked. I would have been happy to return this identity to her and move on.

Marty shrugged. “That’s not my department. I don’t know. I probably couldn’t tell you if I did know.”

“You mentioned a fourth category,” I pressed. “Are you in that category?”

He grinned. “I sure am, babe. Don’t ask any more, though. There are some answers you have to come up with on your own. Those are the rules.”

I leaned against the bar, happy to take a little weight off my heels.

“Damn, this is confusing. I need a smoke.”

“No joy there, babe. No smoking is allowed in Ovid. If it helps, I know what you mean. There’s times when I could use a smoke, too.”

“Smoking’s bad for you,” a woman’s voice called out. I turned and saw an attractive blonde slinging her purse on the bar. She was about my new height, but her figure was a little better proportioned than mine, with better breasts and hips. Not bigger, mind you—just better proportioned. Her hair was long and hung loose over her shoulders, and her face was the kind men stared at for hours. She was dressed

in an outfit much like my own, but in different colors—a white blouse, royal blue skirt, white heels and tan hose. She was one of the shades, but nobody's perfect. If I were still male, I would have been in love with her. Hell, I was female and I was still practically in love with her. "Hi, Marty. Hi, Sly."

"Hi," I managed, not knowing her name.

"Hi, Shelly," Marty said, filling in the blank for me.

"Honey, you still want to go shopping on our break?" she asked me. "I mean, you don't have to get home to Johnny or anything, do you?"

Oh great. There was somebody named Johnny waiting for me at home. I supposed he was some beer-swilling clod who would want to lay me the minute I walked in the... whatever I lived in.

"No, I can go," I said, faking it. "Johnny's not expecting me until tonight."

She grinned. "He's a great guy, isn't he?"

"Oh, sure. A great guy."

Marty coughed to get our attention. "I'm gonna set up the bar. You guys had better get busy, too."

"Come on," Shelly said with a smile. "I'll get the silverware ready and you fill the water pitchers."

Following Shelly's lead, we got everything set up. I had worked in a restaurant when I was in college, and things hadn't changed much through the years. I was able to act as if I knew what I was doing. After a while, I fell into the routine, just as if I were playing a part in one of my own movies. The lunch crowd wasn't very big, and it was pretty tame. Not too many people ordered any alcohol, settling on tea or soda pop. I guess they all had jobs to go back to. A few ordered a beer, but most of the drinkers sat at the bar, hunching over a liquid lunch. I had done that a few times myself, but I was unsettled to note how dreary just sitting at the bar seemed.

Marty kept prompting me, giving me the names of the customers.

Most were friendly enough, and nobody pulled any funny stuff. I suppose living in a small town meant that a guy's misbehavior in a bar might get reported back to a wife or girlfriend pretty quickly. Still, I was nervous during the entire lunch hour. I kept expecting someone to put the moves on me. A couple of them thought about it, but I shut them down pretty fast. I tried to distance myself from the customers as much as I could.

Tips were sparse. When we saw the last of the lunch crowd leave, with only a couple of boozers remaining at the bar, I counted up the tips. Four bucks. Big deal.

"Not much, huh?" Shelly asked. I showed her the take. "Well, a lot of the lunch crowd are cheapskates, but that's pretty bad. I only got about fifteen."

"Fifteen?" I gasped. Funny, but the day before, fifteen bucks wouldn't have gotten my shoes shined. Now, though, I needed money. I wasn't sure how much minimum wage was, but I suspected it wasn't much.

"How come you got so much more than me?"

"Well, for starters, I'm blonde," she said with a grin. When she saw the pained look on my face, the grin faded. "Hey, look honey, I'm just joking. You were kind of off the mark today."

If only she knew. "What do you mean?" I asked glumly.

"Well," she explained, "you weren't your usual friendly self today. I think the customers noticed. I mean, it wouldn't have hurt you to smile a little."

I certainly hadn't found anything to smile about. I had been out there on a hardwood floor tottering around on three-inch heels taking lunch orders from guys with a pound of grease under their fingernails who sat around making cute comments while they took in my cleavage. Then, I got to heft heavy trays loaded with greasy food and clean up whatever they left for quarters and dimes.

"And wiggle that pretty ass of yours a little more," she went on. "The guys like that. A good wiggle can increase your tips by a bunch. You

never had any trouble doing it before. Tell me honey, you didn't get your period early this month, did you?"

Jesus! I hadn't even thought about that. Period? I had to get out of this body. If the waitressing didn't kill me, the period would. What did this Judge have against me anyway? If he wanted to make me fit into Ovid, why didn't he just make me into one of those guys with all the grease under the fingernails? Anything was better than this.

"N... no," I managed. "It's not time for my period." At least I hoped it wasn't.

She gave me a sympathetic look. "Oh, I'm sorry, honey. I know you've been under a lot of stress lately. Are they going to have your car ready today?"

"Car?"

"Yeah. You told me yesterday that there was something wrong with it and that you barely got it in to the shop. Weren't they going to give you an estimate today?"

"Oh, yeah," I managed. At least I had a car. I'd go get it and go over to see the Judge. Maybe there was something I could say or do to get a male body. "Do you think we could go by there first? I mean, maybe it's okay now."

"Sure," she replied. "Let's go."

This was the fourth time I had ridden down the streets of Ovid. The first time, I had a massive hangover. The second, I was in a police cruiser and the hangover wasn't any better. The third time had been with Marty, and I had been too busy handling my transformation to look around. This time, though, I could look around.

Ovid was the poster child for Small Town America. It was neat and clean and looked to be prosperous. The pace was slower, though. As we drove down the main street—creatively called 'Main Street'—I could see shoppers slowly window-shopping in the Oklahoma heat, stopping to greet and talk to friends, and generally taking their time. The majority of them were shades, but nobody seemed to notice or mind.

For that matter, I was starting to think of Shelly as a friend, and she was a shade. I guessed they were just another manifestation of the magic of Ovid, just like I was.

Forester Ford occupied half a block at the far end of Main Street. There was nothing unusual about it. Like many smaller car dealers, it consisted of a large building that housed a showroom in front and a long series of service bays in the rear. The rest of the lot was parking for cars, both new and used, with the newest and shiniest upfront. There seemed to be as many pickups on the lot as cars, which surprised me. Of course, the only car dealership I had visited for years was BMW, and they didn't make a pickup—at least not for American consumption.

Shelly pulled into a parking spot next to the service office. I swung out of her little Capri gracefully enough, as if I had been doing it all my life. I was starting to find out that if I didn't think too much about it, moving as a woman became more natural. I grabbed my purse and walked into the service area.

As a man, mechanics had always treated me as if I knew about cars. The truth is I didn't know a fuel injector from a shock absorber, but that didn't matter. Men always assumed other men knew about cars until they proved otherwise. Now, though, I was a woman. I could have shown the mechanics my Doctorate in Auto Mechanics personally signed by Mr. Goodwrench and they would have still scratched their heads wondering how I managed to get a car in gear to bring it in to them.

"What can I do for you, ma'am?" a shade carrying a clipboard asked. He was a beefy guy dressed in a pair of dark slacks and a white shirt with a nametag that declared him to be Joe Mellon, Service Manager.

"Uh, I brought my car in for an estimate," I managed meekly, completely intimidated by his patronizing look and tone. "I'm... Sylvia Conners."

"Oh yeah," he grunted. "You work over at Randy Andy's, don't you?" The way he said it, he might as well have accused me of working on

my back.

“Yes,” I said, feeling my face flush. I hoped he didn’t notice. I was sure that he wouldn’t, though, because his eyes had yet to rise above the level of my breasts.

“Well, you’ve got a pretty sick car,” he said, leading me over to an aging Ford Tempo, its dark blue paint fading badly. “Take a look,” he went on, raising the hood.

I looked down into the engine compartment, not really having any idea what I was supposed to be seeing.

“Things are pretty gummed up in there,” he told me. “For a start, you need a new fuel pump. Then that whole fuel line looks pretty bad. Your fuel injectors are clogged, too. There’s some other things, as well. I’m surprised you even got it in here.”

“How much?” I sighed. In the car, I had looked in my purse. There were no credit cards and the checkbook showed a balance in a neat feminine hand of two hundred and twelve dollars. Something told me there was no money market account in my name that I could transfer to checking, or any other financial resources for that matter. The Judge had made me as poor as the proverbial church mouse. It was a new feeling for me, and I didn’t like it.

“Five fifty for everything,” he said easily.

There was a sinking feeling in the bottom of my newly shrunken stomach. “Can I pay over time?”

He shifted his weight. “Well, to tell you the truth,” he began in a low, conspiratorial tone, “the boss doesn’t like to do that. I could probably arrange it for you if you could do a little something for me.”

“What?” I asked nervously. I wanted that car.

“Well, I figure you and me could go back to that storeroom over there.” He nodded toward a room in the back of the service bay. “You do a little swallow the sausage for me and I think I can get you credit.”

“You want me to do what?” I practically screamed. I would have hit

him if I thought it would have done any good.

“Hey, quiet,” he ordered, looking around to make sure no one had heard. If anyone had heard me over the noise in the service area, they didn’t acknowledge it. Then, back to me, “So what’s the big deal? I’ve seen you swinging that ass of yours over at Randy Andy’s. I’m sure you’ve put out for a lot of guys. All I’m asking for is a little blowjob. You do me and your car will be ready tonight.”

“Fuck you!” I growled, turning on my heel and storming away.

“Yeah, we could do that instead,” he called after me.

As I stormed out, I nearly collided with a young salesman, or at least I assumed that’s what he was. He was wearing a tie anyway. “Have a nice day,” he said lamely.

“Yeah, right,” I responded through gritted teeth, not bothering to look back at him.

“So what’s the damage?” Shelly asked as I jumped back into the car and slammed the door.

“More than I’ve got,” I muttered, feeling the sting of tears in my eyes.

“Look, honey,” Shelly said, facing me. “If you need a loan, I’ve got a couple of hundred. Will that help?”

So that’s where I had come to. I was a lowly-paid waitress with big tits and a nice ass who couldn’t even pay to have her car fixed without a loan from another lowly-paid waitress with big tits and a nice ass. I felt more tears flow. “I can’t take your money, Shelly.”

“Hey, it’s just a loan,” she assured me. “You can pay me back, and I don’t need it now.”

It was nice of her, but it still wouldn’t be enough to bail out my car. “I’ll think about it.”

“Okay, then let’s go shopping.”

I put a hand on her arm. “Look Shelly,” I began, “I’ve got something I need to take care of. Could you drop me off over at City Hall?”

She looked at me as if I had just asked her for a ride to the dark side of the moon. I didn't want to explain anything to her, but I needed to see the Judge. There had to be another punishment he could inflict upon me. This one was too harsh. I couldn't stand it any longer. I'd rather kill myself than suffer the continual embarrassment and harassment to which I had been subjected.

"What do you need to go there for?" she asked slowly.

"It's a personal matter," was all I would tell her. "Please, Shelly?"

She sighed, "Okay. Here we go."

We made arrangements for her to pick me up again in time to get back to work. With any luck, though, there wouldn't be a Sylvia for her to pick up by then. It all depended upon how good I was at making a deal. I had been a deal maker all my life. Every picture I ever made had been the result of one of those deals. Of course, I had never tried to make a deal with someone like the Judge before, but there had to be something I could offer him.

As Shelly drove away, I took a deep breath and entered City Hall. I was greeted by a pleasant shade receptionist who directed me to the Judge's office. I had no trouble finding it, and wasn't really surprised to see the pretty blonde from the courtroom—Cindy something-or-other, Susan had told me—seated at the desk in his outer office.

She looked up at me in surprise. "Ms. Conners... did you want to make an appointment?"

I had played this scene with a number of studio executives. "Don't call us; we'll call you," as the old joke went, only they never called. Neither would the Judge. I had to see him now. I couldn't stand to be in this body for another hour. I had to cut a new deal with him.

"I really need to see him now," I told her, glancing furtively at his closed door, wondering if I could make it through there before she stopped me.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry—that just isn't possible. The Judge won't see you without an appointment."

She was doing her job well. It was up to me to do mine well, too. Before she realized what was happening, I had bolted for the door.

“No! You mustn’t.”

It was too late. I had opened the door. The Judge looked up from the papers on his desk, a frown on his face.

“Your Honor, I must talk with you,” I pleaded. “It’s very important.”

“I tried to stop her,” the blonde explained.

The Judge dismissed her excuse with a wave of his hand. “It’s all right, Cindy. Ms. Conners has made her point. You can go.”

Reluctantly, she nodded and left, closing the door behind her. The Judge motioned me to a comfortable leather chair in front of his large oak desk. I seated myself with as much dignity as my short skirt permitted, embarrassed that I had to cross my legs at the thigh in a most ladylike fashion to avoid giving him a beaver shot.

“Now, Ms. Conners, what is so important that you couldn’t wait and make an appointment with me?” His tone was cool. I had a tough audience, I knew. I had to get my point across quickly or he’d throw me out. But as I said, I had charmed many a studio executive into backing my films. Surely I could talk the Judge into seeing I had no business being a girl.

“Your Honor,” I began as respectfully as I could, “I understand your need to punish me for drug possession, but surely there must be something else I can do to serve my sentence. By the way, how long is my sentence as a girl?”

“The rest of your life,” he said without emotion.

“Yes... well, maybe there’s something else I can do. I mean, I could maybe make a documentary for the city—free, of course. I’d be glad to do it. I can promise you that if you make me a man again, I’ll produce the kind of documentary that will really help your town grow.”

I was starting to really get into my pitch, but he suddenly silenced me with a wave of his hand. “You don’t seem to understand, Ms. Conners.

We have a very strict policy on growth here in Ovid. Your Hollywood skills are of little use to us. To the contrary, I think your new identity serves us very well."

"But I don't want to be a girl!" I blurted out. I cursed myself. I was never so emotional in a presentation. It had to be this female body taking partial control of me.

"What you want is of no importance," he said calmly. "You should actually feel very fortunate, Ms. Conners."

"Fortunate?"

He nodded. "Yes, I have no use for people who abuse their bodies by taking drugs. There is a tree in a nearby park who was once a drug dealer. There are also some stray animals who once dealt in drugs. Had I any proof that you ever sold drugs, I would have given you a similar fate."

I shuddered. It was bad enough being a girl. Being a stray dog or something sounded a hell of a lot worse.

"In fact," he went on, "I was very gentle with you. When Marty asked me to make a new waitress for him, he was very specific in what he requested. I modified his request somewhat. Perhaps it's time you realized how fortunate you are."

He waived his hand at me, muttering a few words I couldn't understand. Suddenly, I felt a tingling in my breasts again. With alarm, I noticed they were swelling outward. I could feel my hair growing again. As I pulled a strand of it in front of my eyes, I could see it had turned to a shade of blonde so pale it could only have come from a bottle.

"What are you doing to me?" I asked in a perky little voice that had gone up another half an octave, giving me an almost childish tone.

"See for yourself," he replied as the air in front of me suddenly shimmered and became reflective like a mirror.

I stood up in shock. My hair was now curly and very, very blonde, hanging nearly to my ass. My face had become almost childlike, but

there was nothing childish about my makeup, which had suddenly become almost clownish, particularly where the very pink lipstick accentuated my thicker pouting lips. My figure had become something out of a cartoon, with exaggerated breasts and hips and an even slimmer waist. My clothes had changed as well, becoming even tighter and whorish. My feet were now in platform heels, so high I could only guess at their height. I could see at my ankle, there was even a tattoo. It appeared to be of a bird—probably an eagle—taking flight.

“Perhaps you would prefer this version of yourself,” the Judge teased. “I thought it a little extreme for Ovid, but perhaps this would convince you that I mean business.”

“But there aren’t any women like this is nature!” I protested, nearly cringing at the sound of my high, almost childish voice.

“Oh, but there are,” the Judge told me with a leer. “It’s just that most of them have been enhanced with surgery. You’ll be pleased to know that your new breasts are natural—no silicone there. It’s a shame for them to go to waste, though. Perhaps I should give in to Marty’s request and allow strip show at...”

“No!” I screamed, tears streaming down my face, leaving black trails of moistened mascara on my cheeks. I looked away from the image, unable to stand what I had become. “Please, Your Honor. Don’t leave me like this. I’ll do anything—anything you ask, but don’t leave me this way.”

He gave me a solemn stare while tapping the ends of his fingers together. It seemed as if hours were going by with the only sound being my whimpering. I couldn’t remain like this. I knew what would happen to me if I did. Already, I could feel odd new sensations coursing through my body. My crotch was damp and my giant nipples seemed about to explode. I would be out of control in this body. I would be a stereotypical whore. I would be one of the bimbos I had written into my movies, a masturbatory fantasy that would have every male in Ovid ready to jump me.

“Very well,” the Judge said at last. “I’ll make you a deal, but not the

one you asked for. Here is what I require. Think of this as one of your tamer movies. You will act the part you have been given. You will be a good little waitress at Marty's bar. You will be feminine and servile while you are there. In return, I will make you into the Sylvia Connors I originally designed for you."

"But for how long?" I managed to ask.

"Why, for the rest of your life," he told me.

My heart sank. What choice did I have, though? The Judge had the very powers I had ascribed to the godlike character in 'A Night in Olympus.' Perhaps he really was from Olympus. Of course. Ovid had written of the gods. Perhaps they had really existed—still existed. But whether the Judge was a god or not, he had divine power over me. I looked down at my exaggerated form with the massive breasts and the large hips that would swivel with inhuman seductiveness every time I moved.

"Do we have a deal?" he asked calmly.

I closed my eyes. "Yes, we have a deal." I felt my body shifting once again. When it was done, I opened my eyes to see once more the attractive but no longer voluptuous version of Sylvia Connors. I would never have dreamed before I had walked into the Judge's office how happy I would be to see this version again.

"You are as you were with one exception," the Judge told me. An exception? What had he done to me. Looking down, I saw it. I still had the tattoo of the eagle he had given me. "It will serve as a reminder to you," he explained. "Should you decide to renege on our deal, you will be transformed into a creature not unlike the one I have shown you tonight. Whenever you feel the urge to break our deal, just look at the tattoo and remember what will happen to you. Am I clear?"

"Very clear," I replied, actually pleased to have a normal feminine voice once more.

"Then our business is concluded," he said gruffly. "Good day to you, Ms. Connors." With that, he returned to the pile of papers on his desk.

I had been summarily dismissed. I rose without a word and left the office.

The blonde—Cindy—looked relieved when she saw me. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“I think so,” I replied. But was I all right? Physically, I felt fine—better than I had as a fifty-year-old man. About the only physical problem I had (other than the fact that I was involuntarily female) was that my breasts felt bloated. I wondered if the Judge had left them a little larger. Also, I was a man in spirit who had just been told that I would remain a woman for the rest of my life. Maybe I could have tolerated being a different woman, but Sylvia Connors wasn’t who I was. I was used to power lunches and being in charge. I was used to a home on the beach, fast cars, and even faster women. I was used to the glamour of Hollywood.

Wait a minute, I thought as I waited at the curb for Shelly, what glamour? Was it glamorous to be always running fast just to keep up with the rest of the world? Was it glamorous to go to bed with women who wouldn’t have given me a second look if I hadn’t had a part to offer them? Was it glamorous to be stoned out of my mind three or four times a week? Was it glamorous to be fifty, looking at waking up every day with a new ache or pain that might not ever go away?

I could do this, I told myself. I could be Sylvia Connors. Oh, it wasn’t my first choice, but I was now young again. I was fairly good looking, especially in a small town. I might not have an education as Sylvia, but I still had my native wits. I’d use my assets to improve my new persona. First, I’d dump this Johnny guy who sat around back at my place while I worked. Then I’d keep my eyes and ears open for opportunities. I wouldn’t let the Judge grind me down. The bastard might be incredibly powerful, but he hadn’t heard the last of Phil Malone yet.

It was a different Sylvia who went back to work at Randy Andy’s that afternoon. I knew the Judge would somehow be aware of what I did, so I resolved to treat my new identity like a role in a movie. I would be the teasing waitress in a sleazy bar that my part called for. I would

wiggle my ass seductively and smile at guys who would want me but never be able to have me. I would be as seductive as I could be without getting myself raped.

“Now you’re getting the hang of it!” Marty said with encouragement from behind the bar. I gave him one of the same little smiles I had been giving the customers, and he reacted just like they did, with a happy little smile of his own.

And my god, how the money rolled in. It was only Wednesday night, but you would have thought it was Friday night from the crowd. Most of the tables were filled, and there was a line waiting to use the pool table.

“At least it’ll die off early tonight,” Shelly said. “Most of these guys are working to build that new addition out at Vulman Industries. They all have to get up early.”

“You wouldn’t guess it from the way they’re drinking,” I replied. We were both waiting at the bar for Marty to fill our trays with drinks.

“Oh, that’s construction workers for you,” Shelly laughed. “I used to be married to one right out of high school. He could party half the night and still be at work at sunrise.”

I knew Shelly was a little older than me, but I hadn’t known she had been married. Of course, as a shade, it was hard to tell if she had really been married or just thought she had been. “So why did you breakup?”

She shrugged. “I caught him partying with somebody else. I threw him out, bag and baggage. I didn’t even keep a picture of him as a reminder. You know, you’re lucky you have Johnny.”

“Yeah, real lucky,” I agreed, but I didn’t feel lucky. I had been thinking about Johnny all evening. What was he like? I didn’t relish the idea of going home to a boyfriend. Johnny meant that I couldn’t be myself, even at home. He would probably want me to spread my legs for him the minute I walked in the door. I didn’t think I could do that, but it was probably expected of me—by both Johnny and the Judge.

At least most of the customers were pretty well behaved. Not that they really needed my attention. The Borland twins—Jean and Tina—were apparently fixtures at Randy Andy's, and they kept the boys happy. Although they weren't particularly attractive, they seemed to be spending a lot of their time leading guys on. Occasionally, one of them would lead one of the patrons out into the parking lot, presumably into the cab of his pickup truck for a little action. Better them than me, I thought grimly.

Although most of the customers were in groups, I had one customer who sat alone. He had come in early and had staked out a corner booth. From there, he seemed to be observing the crowd. He would order a beer every now and then, just for appearances, I thought, for he didn't seem to be particularly anxious to drink it.

"Anything else you need?" I asked him in a friendly tone.

He looked up at me. He was a handsome man, I realized. That wasn't something I would have probably noticed before my transformation. Even sitting, he appeared tall (of course I was now much shorter, so all things are relative) with dark brown hair and an evenly tanned complexion. He gave me a wan smile and said, "No, I'm fine. But I suspect there is something you need."

I stepped back a step. Was this a come-on? God (or the gods) knew I had had enough of them during the evening. Most were innocent enough, but it seemed every horny male—in other words, all the males—in the place wanted to take me home as a personal play toy.

He smiled a little broader. "Don't worry. I didn't mean that. In fact, since you used to be a man, I doubt seriously if you would want that anyway. At least now. Of course, if you remain as you are now, it won't be long until you'll actually look forward to it."

I cringed internally at that thought. "Look, Mister, who are you and what do you want?"

"Who I am isn't important. My name wouldn't mean anything to you anyway. As for what I want, I want information, and I'm willing to pay for it in a way you can use."

I looked around to see if anyone was listening to our conversation. Not only weren't the customers listening to us, but they seemed to be unaware we were even there. Also, their conversations seemed muted, as if I were listening to them with cotton in my ears.

"It's magic, of course," he told me. "I can't use it long, though, or I'll be discovered. All I want you to do for me is find someone connected with Vulman Industries—it can be one of these construction workers or an actual Vulman employee—who would be willing to help me with a little industrial espionage. You just need to introduce me—I'll do the rest."

"And what do I get for this?" I asked suspiciously.

"Your manhood back," he said simply.

I gasped. "You can do that?"

He nodded. "That and much more. I can see to it that you are returned to your rightful identity and made immune to the Judge's magic."

"You'd have to be very powerful to do that," I pointed out sceptically.

"You'd have to be as powerful as the Judge, and I think he may be Jup..." I suddenly choked, unable to say "Jupiter." When I stopped trying to say it, the choking stopped.

"Can't say Jupiter?" he asked with a little smile. "See? I can say it. Jupiter. That, of course is who the Judge is; you are correct. Consider that a little demonstration of my power. Now, do we have a deal?"

It was tempting. I had only been female for a few hours, but that was long enough for me to realize I didn't like it. But I was afraid of crossing the Judge. No matter how powerful this man—if he was a man—turned out to be, I would be resisting powers I was only now beginning to understand. The results could be unpleasant at best and fatal at worst. Or maybe there was even something worse than fatal.

"I'd like to think about it," I said finally.

He was silent for a moment. "Very well, but don't take too long. Ovid has a bad habit of growing on its new residents. I can return tomorrow at this same time for an answer."

I nodded in agreement. Suddenly, the noise level in the room returned to normal.

“Hey, Sly!” a big farm boy called out. “How about another round?”

“Sure,” I called with a smile I didn’t feel. I turned back to my mysterious would-be conspirator, but the booth was empty. Not even his empty beer bottle remained.

I was still turning his offer over in my mind as Shelly drove me home.

Home turned out to be a trailer park, and my trailer appeared to be one of the more modest ones—older with a few dents and fading paint that looked bad at night and probably even worse in the daylight. So that was the way it was going to be, I thought. I was trailer trash. I found myself regretting I had ever made that film ‘Tanya, Queen of the Trailer Park.’ Somehow, it seemed as if a number of my raunchier films were coming back to bite me in my newly plump ass.

“Give Johnny a kiss for me,” Shelly said with a smile. “He’s such a sweetheart.”

You want him? You can have him, I thought. I was going to walk through that door to be greeted by some beer-swilling cretin who would want me to spread my tired legs for him. If I killed him, I wondered if I could get Susan to get me off by pleading justifiable homicide. No, with my luck, the Judge would bring him back from the dead.

Tentatively, I opened the trailer door with my key. I wasn’t sure how I knew it was the right key. It seemed as if when you just relaxed and did something, it was the right thing. I wondered if it would work for putting on makeup before work.

There was a light on in the small, modest living room of the trailer, and the flicker of a small television could be seen, reflected against the far wall. To my surprise, though, there was no guy parked in front of it in a T-shirt. Instead, a middle-aged black woman was there. She wore a long, shapeless dress, but it would have been fair to say that she was a few pounds over her ideal weight. Her hair was black with noticeable

streaks of gray, pulled back in a bun. Her skin was nice, though, dark and without blemishes. In all, she was not an unattractive woman, but hardly the sort a lot of men would have been terribly interested in. I guess there were worse people to be changed into than Sylvia Conners.

She looked up at me with cheery brown eyes. "Well, well, I see the Judge has gone and made a real person out of you."

"Yes, I'm new," I admitted, "but how did you know? How did you know I still had my memory? And who are you?"

"Well," she chuckled, "I knew you were real because you ain't no shade anymore. That's an easy one. As for knowing you had your memory, you don't act quite like Sly. She was a little more trampy than you. And you don't act like you know what's goin' on just yet. As for who I am, I'm Callie, and I'm your neighbor."

"But, what are you doing here?"

"Lord, you are just full of questions," she commented with a wide grin of perfect white teeth. "I been watching Johnny. What did you'all think?"

"Johnny?" It was starting to dawn on me. I would have come up with the right answer even without the sudden little cry from the next room. "Johnny's a baby?"

"Of course he's a baby," Callie replied. "What did you think? ... Oh, I see," she laughed. "You thought you had yourself a big ole boyfriend, didn't you? Well, that's a good one on you."

She got up and went into the room, returning shortly with a baby, dressed in thin sleeper pajamas. He couldn't have been much more than a year old. I felt sudden relief as I watched the little guy, gently rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"This here's Johnny," Callie told me, "and he's all yours."

He was, too. As Callie placed him in my arms, I could see the family resemblance. He had dark hair and fair skin, and an angular little face not unlike my own. He giggled when he looked up into my face. I

involuntarily smiled, as if there was something within me that wanted to bond with this little miniature person.

“How old is he?” I asked softly as the little guy reached up with a tiny hand to brush my face.

“He just had his first birthday a couple of weeks ago,” she told me, almost as proudly as if she were the parent. “He’s startin’ to walk, too. Walks pretty good for a porch baby.”

“And the father?” I asked with a nervous tightness in my stomach.

Callie sighed. “I expect you know by now how Ovid works.”

“Sort of,” I agreed, sitting in a cheap dinette chair. Little Johnny was getting heavy.

“Then you know that you got a past. Yours ain’t too good. Your momma was kinda trampy. She moved here about three... maybe four years ago with no sign of your daddy. Then she picked up with some fella from Tulsa last year. They took off for Dallas and ain’t been seen or heard from since.”

In other words, they probably didn’t even exist except in people’s memories. That made things simpler for the Judge. He could makeup somebody like me and not worry about giving me much of a family.

“Anyhow,” she went on, “you was kinda trampy yourself. You picked up with a boy who was just passin’ through. He knocked you up and then left town.”

Another loose end taken care of. In a way, I was relieved. That meant there was nobody waiting in the next room to spread my legs. I wasn’t ready for that and didn’t know if I would ever be.

“So here I am, a trampy waitress in a two-bit bar and a rug rat to support,” I summed up.

She chuckled, “That’s just about the size of it, honey. Don’t you pout about it, though. It could be a lot worse. I heard tell you brought drugs into Ovid.”

“I wasn’t going to sell them,” I pointed out. “They were just—you know—

recreational drugs.”

“The Judge doesn’t like drugs,” she told me. “There’s a drug dealer who came through Ovid about a year ago. Now, he’s a big oak tree in one the parks. If you were a drug dealer and not just a drug user, you might be out there makin’ acorns with him.”

I shuddered at the thought. It seemed everybody knew that story. I had no doubt that the Judge could have done that to me if he had wished. My thoughts were interrupted by a tiny hand pulling at my blouse and an insistent squeal.

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked. I had never been around babies. I was the youngest child in my family, and I never sired a child, so holding this squirming creature was a new experience for me.

“He’s hungry,” she laughed.

“Hungry? Well, okay, what does he eat?”

With a smile, she pointed at one of my prominent breasts.

I shook my head. “Oh, no, I’m not going to... I mean, I don’t know how...”

“Here,” she said pleasantly. “Let me show you. First, get that top off.”

I handed her the baby and removed my top, experiencing as I did the swollen sensation in my breasts. Callie helped me pull a breast out of its cup with a minimum of discomfiture. Then, she handed Johnny back to me. Almost at once, he instinctively moved his little mouth up to my waiting nipple. I cringed, expecting a pinching pain, but to my surprise, the sensation was not painful. Instead, I felt a feeling I had never experienced before. It was as if I was one with the baby, letting him suck the milk out of my breast with a contented sigh. I could actually feel the swollen sensation beginning to abate as he worked on the nipple. Suddenly, I sighed, too. The feeling was almost sexual.

“Well,” Callie said, rising to go, “I can see you got the hang of it. I’ll be goin’ now. You’ll sleep tight tonight.”

“Wait!” I begged. “Don’t go. I don’t know what to do with him.”

“Oh, you’ll get it all figured out,” she told me. “Just let yourself go. The answers will be there, all natural-like. Now I need my beauty sleep, so I’ll see you in the morning. You goin’ to work at eleven?”

“I guess so,” I replied.

“Then I’ll see you about ten thirty. We can have ourselves a cup of coffee and talk.”

With that, she was gone, leaving me with a suckling baby. Had it only been—what—a little over twelve hours ago that I had been turned into a woman? It didn’t seem possible, and yet here I was, sitting in a chair in women’s clothing, my bra pushed up as a baby nursed hungrily at my engorged breast. By all rights, I should have run screaming from the trailer and thrown myself off the nearest cliff, but I couldn’t bring myself to seriously contemplate it. I felt oddly satisfied, as if I was... needed. Yes, that was it. In my entire life, I had never been needed, and yet here I was, a nursing mother, needed by this little lump of flesh who was falling asleep attached to my nipple. Without thinking much about it, I shifted him to the other breast. After a small grumble, he settled in on it, relieving the swollen feeling with his tiny mouth.

I had never contemplated having children—at least not seriously. Early in my career, the idea of a family never occurred to me. I was too busy trying to become a popular director. Then, as my career degenerated into the sleazy side of the force, I had begun to think of women as merely objects. I realized as I sat there in a maternal position condition that all women were not bimbos, but the ones I had long associated with were. None of them qualified to be the mother of my child.

Of course, I was little more than a bimbo myself now. Here I was, the proverbial unwed mother, scrambling to make a modest living by swinging ass in some cheap bar, walking the tightrope between being sexy enough to get sufficient tips to live and demure enough to keep from ending up in some patron’s back seat.

Speaking of patrons, what about the man who had offered me a way out of this mess? What if he could really do what he said? If he could, he was probably my only ticket out of this town. I was certain the

Judge would never change me back. So that was it. I either took the man's offer and hoped for the best, or I remained Sylvia Conners, resident trailer tramp for the rest of my life.

I looked down. The little guy was asleep. I smiled in spite of myself. This might all be a sham, but it actually felt good to have a part of myself go on, even if it was from Sylvia's genes and not Phil's genes. Since the little tyke was real, that meant he would grow up as a real person. I supposed he had been someone else before, changed by the Judge, but like Janice, he seemed to have no knowledge of who he had been. He was just little Johnny Conners—a baby. My baby.

I carefully put him down in his crib, covering him with a light summer blanket, protection against the trailer's humming ancient air conditioner. I wondered if he was warm enough. Or maybe I should change his diaper. No, he seemed happy. I left him to sleep.

Alone in my own humble bedroom, I stripped out of my clothes, really seeing myself for the first time. Oh, I had seen bits and pieces before. I had, of course, seen my breasts while nursing, and I had had the dubious opportunity to examine myself between my legs while going to the can, but this was the first time I had had to just stand before the mirror and examine the whole package. I wasn't bad, in a small town sort of way. The figure was reasonably good for a woman who had given birth. I mean, the hips were a little wide and the breasts a little large, but there was no excess fat that I could detect. Apparently Sylvia worked to get back in shape after I—she—gave birth. Of course, shagging drinks at Randy Andy's was good exercise, I realized feeling an ache in my calf muscles.

The hair and face were okay, too, but I was wearing too much makeup. Well, maybe I wasn't, given my role in this new life. I didn't look too tarty—just a little tarty. It figured. I was wearing enough makeup to get tips, but not enough to get pawed.

My legs were probably my best feature. They were the sort of legs that in my movies would have required a close-up, panning slowly out to show them walking away in four-inch heels while the ass swayed to the music. Now, I would have to keep them shaved, I realized.

I remembered how in the movies I had made, girls would often stand in front of a mirror, feeling their nipples and massaging their clits as they undulated to the cheap jazz soundtrack. Well, there was no jazz playing, and I didn't particularly want to experience an orgasm looking into the mirror any more than as a man, I would have wanted to watch myself jack off. But I was curious. Having Johnny at my breasts had shown me that the nipples were, indeed, sensitive. What would it feel like, I wondered, to have a man licking those nipples? Would it feel good? Of course it would, I realized, stroking one of them lightly.

As a man, I had never taken very long to get it up. One look at a hot babe and I had a tent pole between my legs. So as a woman, I didn't really think I was doing anything that provocative, for there was nothing getting hard between my legs. The wetness that had begun and the feeling in my clitoris were too subtle for me to recognize until it was nearly too late. I looked down at myself, realizing suddenly what I had done. I didn't want to masturbate. I was just curious. I released my nipples and turned from the mirror.

My body was demanding something, I thought, ashamed that I could feel the sexual needs of a woman so quickly. Perhaps it was part of the magic of Ovid. Would I crave the sexual attentions of men as I had once craved those of numerous women? God, I hoped not. Experimentally, though, I tried to imagine what it would be like, to have a big, strong man slide his dick between my legs and into my...

No! There it was again—that feeling between my legs. I began to cry for no reason at all. My tears were tears of frustration. I was frustrated at being poor, being a woman, being horny. I fell on the bed, sobbing softly to myself. I had to relieve the frustration somehow. No matter what, when I woke up the next day, I would still be poor. I would still be a woman. Damn it, there was no way I was going to be so horny, though. Before my rational male mind could stop me, I thrust my hand back between my legs.

Oh God! It happened quicker than I could have imagined. Who could have known? Who could have known? The wave of pleasure was intense. It began between my legs and at my breasts and spread

through my entire being. I gave a sudden gasp and squeezed my eyes tightly shut. Could there be a better feeling in the entire universe? My sobs had turned to whimpers as I basked in the afterglow of my orgasm. Unlike my male self, I felt no urge to fall asleep. Instead, it was as if all of my senses were heightened. No wonder women resented it when their male lovers fell asleep right after sex. Male orgasm was like an explosion, uncontrolled and overwhelming, but gone in an instant. Female orgasm, though, was like the tide, ebbing and flowing with power, but with grace as well. I did fall asleep eventually as the tide flowed in and out once more...

Every now and then, I had read a script where a man gets changed into a woman. He wakes up the next day and stumbles off to the bathroom, unaware that he has changed. Believe me, it doesn't work that way, or at least it didn't for me. When my eyes opened in the morning brightness, I was instantly aware of who and what I was. Of course, it helped that there was the insistent crying of a baby demanding to be fed that brought me back to my new reality. Just the sound of his cries made my nipples become sensitive.

I threw on a worn robe and stumbled into Johnny's room. He was there waiting for me, standing unsteadily at the rail of his crib. He brightened considerably upon seeing me. "Ma-ma!" he called, or something that sounded like that. Babies I discovered have a language of their own. It's just we adults aren't always smart enough to understand it.

"I guess so, kid," I mumbled tiredly as I pulled him up. He was a heavy little bugger, or maybe I was just weaker. And he smelled like the bottom of a cesspool.

"Christ!" I muttered, peeling the disposable diaper off his little rear. At least it wasn't too hard to change him, I thought confidently. Of course, just as I was ready to attach a new one to his little bottom, a warm spray erupted from his tiny penis. I was quick enough to cover him before it streamed upward into my face, but my hand was suddenly wet. Great—a valuable lesson had been learned. Never leave a male baby exposed or you might have the nursery version of a golden

shower. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

Nursing was easier the second time, and in a perverse fashion, I again found it enjoyable. It wasn't enough, though. Apparently, a one year old still likes to nurse, but requires other food as well. I was wondering what to feed him when there was a knock at the door.

It was Callie, bright and cheerful. "How you getting along, honey?"

"Okay, I guess," I said. "Look, do you have any idea what he eats now?"

She grinned. "Now that you've had a good night's sleep, let Callie show you the ropes."

She did, too. She showed me where everything was, told me what Johnny liked and didn't like, and even went over a few other things I would need to know to be a successful woman. Thank God for Callie, I thought. I would probably have accidentally killed the baby if I had had to figure out everything for myself. That was a dark thought, I realized. I was actually starting to feel attached to Johnny. He was acute little thing. If I had to be his mother, I wanted to be a good one. He couldn't help who he was any more than I could help who I had become.

Then I made us a pot of coffee. As I poured it, I said, "Callie, you're a godsend. How long have you been here in Ovid?"

"Oh, not long, honey," she said nodding gratefully at the coffee.

"Who were you before? I mean, before Ovid."

She shook her head and chuckled. "Just another woman. Most of us don't talk much about what came before Ovid. It doesn't mean much."

"Oh," I said, sipping my own coffee. At least I wouldn't have to tell her my story. I wondered what she would think if she knew I had been a man.

"I didn't see your car this morning," Callie said over her coffee. It was just Folgers instead of the special Italian roast I was used to, but it felt good to be sitting there with Callie drinking it. Then, when she mentioned the car, my face clouded, as I felt my plight once again.

“It’s still in the shop,” I told her. “I don’t have the money to get it out yet.”

She put a black hand on the back of my arm. “You poor thing. Old Henry on the other side of me—he’s retired and gets groceries and things for me. Why don’t we make up a list of what you and the baby will need and give it to him? Then you won’t have to worry about shopping.”

I agreed that that was a great idea. But there was still one errand that I had to do by myself. While I nursed, I had been thinking about the offer the stranger had made to me. It was tempting. Yesterday, I would have made a deal with the devil to get my old life back. Now, though, I wasn’t so sure. Oh, of course if the Judge had offered me the opportunity, I would have taken it in a heartbeat. But the stranger wasn’t the Judge. In fact, he was probably an enemy of the Judge. I had seen what the Judge could do when he was angry. If I chose the wrong side, I could be endangering my very existence. And what about Johnny? If something happened to me, what would happen to him?

It was funny, I thought. I had really never cared that much about anybody or anything except my career. Now, a little rug rat I had not even known had in a few hours become the center of my thoughts. It was magic, I knew. The Judge had given me a healthy dose of maternal instinct along with my new sex. That was obvious, but it made it no less real.

“Callie,” I asked carefully, “do you think Old Henry could give me a ride this morning?”

Old Henry proved to be a slender, jovial man about as black as Callie. He was bald with just a fringe of white hair over his ears. Callie had said he was retired, but in reality, he was a shade. I suspected the only work he had ever performed was being Old Henry. Still, he was pleasant to chat with, and he told me that he would give my groceries to Callie. He offered to pick me up, but I told him to go on. In truth, I didn’t want him to know what I was up to.

I had looked up the address of Susan Jager's office. She had a Main Street address. How original, I thought sarcastically. The main street of Ovid was 'Main Street.' I was probably going to find that funny for a long time. Still it had made it easy for me. I had simply told Old Henry to drop me off on Main Street. I told him I was going to the bank.

"Farmers' and Merchants'?" he asked.

"Sure," I replied. I had noticed in my checkbook that it was my bank. I had no idea how far her office would be from the bank, but it couldn't be too far, I thought. Ovid didn't look like that big of a town.

Sometimes, you get lucky, I thought with a smile as I stood in front of the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank. There it was, an inconspicuous door right next to the bank proclaiming that the law offices of Susan Jager were on the second floor. I carefully climbed up the stairs, afraid that I would stumble and fall since I was wearing the heels and a tight skirt that I would be wearing at work. At least my practice at work the day before seemed to have done me some good. I had no trouble negotiating the old wooden stairs in my heels.

A fortyish woman sat at a computer in the reception area. She was an attractive shade for her age, with fairly short brown hair just beginning to go gray. "Can I help you?" she asked pleasantly, but I realized that in spite of her manner, she didn't approve of me. There I was, all dolled up for work with my makeup just a little overdone, my white blouse cut a little low, my black skirt just a little short and my heels just a little high. It would have really blown her mind if her desk hadn't blocked her view of my tattoo.

"Yes, I'd like to see Ms. Jager," I replied, trying to sound as professional as I had in the outer office of many a Hollywood producer.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but I think she'll want to see me," I said confidently. It was an old line in Hollywood, but I hoped that the secretarial screen wasn't quite as sophisticated in Ovid.

She studied me for a moment, then called out, "Susan, there's a young lady out here to see you." The word 'lady' had sounded a little forced. I shifted a little uneasily on my heels.

Susan Jager appeared suddenly at the door to her office. She looked at me for a moment, a bit puzzled. We were about the same height now, I noted. Then, a little smile of recognition crossed her face. "Come on in, Sly," she said, eyes twinkling. "Dori, would you get us some coffee?"

When we had settled in with our coffee at Susan's conference table, Dori closed the door behind her, leaving us in private. Susan looked at me with narrowed eyes. "If you've come to get me to talk the Judge into changing you back, you can forget it," she said.

I shook my head, feeling my long hair caress my neck. "No, I know that won't do any good. I've already tried." I stretched my leg out where she could see it. Through the nylons, my tattoo was clearly visible. "I got this as a reminder not to try again."

"Nice tattoo," she commented. "I'd say he let you off easily."

"I suppose," I sighed. "But to be honest, I'd do about anything to get my old body back. I can't say I'm crazy about being a woman."

Susan gave me a little smile. "You'll get used to it. We all do."

I looked at her, stunned. I had never imagined for a moment that this woman before me had ever been anything but a woman. She looked and acted so feminine. Professional, but feminine, I should say. I noticed the wedding ring on her finger. "So he made you into a married woman," I ventured.

She shook her head with another smile. "No, I did that to myself—the married part, that is."

My eyes were wide. "You mean you actually married a guy after you changed?"

"Sure. Why not? It's a little hard to maintain an interest in women around here when you are one. You'll find out all about that. Your mind will say 'no' for a while, but your body will say 'yes.' Eventually,

your body will win.”

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that. Men didn't look that interesting to me. I mean, I could appreciate that some of them were nice looking, but the idea of becoming romantically attracted to one was a little more than I had thought about.

“In any case,” Susan said, getting down to business, “I don't imagine you came in this morning just to discuss this. And if you don't want me to try to get you changed back, what can I do for you?”

“Well,” I began, shifting uneasily in my chair. I seemed to have nothing in my wardrobe except thong panties, and they were riding up a little uncomfortably, “I need to know something. Are you still my lawyer?”

“If you want me to be.”

“I do, so this conversation is confidential?”

She nodded carefully.

“Well, there was this man in the bar yesterday...” I went on to tell her what had happened. She listened carefully, stopping me occasionally to ask a question. When I had finished, I asked, “What do you think I should do? Can he do what he says? Can he change me back?”

“Perhaps,” Susan said cautiously.

“Then should I do what he asks?” I pressed. “I mean, he didn't ask me to do anything illegal. All he wanted me to do was report back any conversations I overheard. What could be the harm?”

Susan sighed, gathering her thoughts. Then, she began, “Sly, have you figured out who the Judge is? Don't try to tell me. You won't be able to speak his name to me. Do you know, though?”

I nodded.

“Then you might remember from your mythology that... beings like the Judge had powerful enemies.”

It was true. As I remembered, they had overthrown the Titans, a pantheon of gods far older than themselves. Most legends even

allowed that Jupiter and the other major gods were offspring of the Titans. I nodded again.

"I'm not privy to all the information," Susan told me. "In fact, I think only the ones like the Judge really know all the facts. Apparently some of their enemies weren't destroyed. Instead, they're still out there someplace. In any case, they have made some... probes in Ovid in the past few months. Most of these probes are minor when taken individually. For some reason, though, they keep happening. Maybe in the aggregate, they are important. It's obviously no business of mere mortals."

"So what you're saying is that I should keep my pretty little nose out of this," I surmised. "But what if this is my only chance to get my old life back? If I don't do this, Susan, I'll be stuck as a bar waitress for the rest of my life. You don't know what that's like. You at least got to be a lawyer. You get to wear subtle makeup and business suits and reasonable heels while I have to go around looking like a tart. You're a respected member of the community while I'm trailer trash." There were tears forming in my eyes, and my voice was quavering. I felt so frustrated and helpless as I balled my hands into fists, only to be reminded painfully of who I was as my long nails sunk into the flesh of my palms.

Susan rose and came over to me, putting her arm around me in a womanly manner. "Listen, Sly, it's always hardest at first. I know the offer looks tempting right now. That's why this guy—whoever he is—offered it to you the first day. Things will get better for you, I'm sure."

I wasn't sure. I lived in a trailer, I had a baby, I didn't have enough money to get my car out of the shop, I worked in a bar, and I had big tits. I had done enough movies about girls like I had become to know that my future was questionable at best. "Susan, what can I do? I never did anything to deserve this. What if I'm turning down my one chance to get my life back to normal?"

"Look, Sly," she said squeezing my shoulders in a sisterly hug, "I'm going to give you some lawyerly advice. Go to the authorities about this. Do it right now so there's no question as to which side you're on."

I'll even drive you over."

"To see who?"

She shrugged. "The Judge, of course."

I didn't look forward to meeting with the Judge again. My last meeting with him had almost left me a stereotypical bimbo. When I expressed hesitation though, Susan argued forcefully in favor of it. In the end, I took my lawyer's advice. Years in the movie business had taught me many valuable lessons. One of the most valuable was that it was often disastrous to go against the advice of your attorney. In a matter of minutes, we were in the Judge's office.

It was obvious that Susan and the Judge's secretary, Cindy, were very good friends. I supposed it was natural given that Susan probably spent a substantial amount of time talking to the Judge. In any event, we were shown in immediately. The Judge rose and gently shook Susan's hand, favoring me only with a reserved nod.

"I assume you have advised your client that it is not a good idea to attempt to appeal my sentence," the Judge said to Susan, ignoring me even though I was seated next to her.

"We've come about another matter, Your Honor," she said smoothly. I was relieved to have her doing the talking. The less I had to say to the Judge, the better I liked it.

When Susan finished her story, explaining to the Judge what had happened to me and the offer the stranger had proffered, he looked at me with a stern eye. "You have agreed to come here and cooperate with us unconditionally?" he asked suspiciously.

"I have," I managed to say in a meek voice.

"You realize that you will be Sylvia Connors for the rest of your life, no matter what the outcome of this incident?" he asked.

I had had a pretty good idea that no matter what I did, the Judge was determined to leave me in this form. It could have been worse, I rationalized. I had only been a girl for a day, but in that time, I had been immersed in the role until it was almost starting to feel natural. If

I were to help the stranger and cross the Judge, my fate might be far worse, I realized. "I understand, Your Honor."

The Judge visibly relaxed. "Very well. Since we all understand that, here is what I expect you to do. I want you to accept his offer."

"What?" Susan and I interjected at the same time.

"Yes," he confirmed with no change of expression. "You will agree to his terms, whatever they are, and carefully report back to him as he requires. Is that clear?"

Susan and I could only nod our heads.

"Good!" he exclaimed with a wide smile. "Then I believe our business is ended. Good day to you both."

Susan drove me to Randy Andy's so we could talk in the car. "I don't understand," I told her. "Why doesn't he just arrest the guy and change him? He can be me. I'd gladly let him wiggle his ass for tips for the rest of his life."

"Don't be bitter," Susan admonished. "Our meeting with the Judge went well."

"How can you tell?"

"I've been dealing with him for some time now," she told me. "By coming to him, he has given you the benefit of the doubt. That might pay off some day."

Soon, I hoped, as we pulled up in front of the bar. I had to admit, my job was getting easier. Working lunch the day before had been traumatic since I had just been transformed. Now, though, I was getting used to the job. Not that I liked it, mind you, but it wasn't quite so alien. I was quickly learning who the regulars were. Needless to say, they got the best service since a tip a day keeps the bill collectors away. I was also learning how to move so I gracefully avoided the little pats on the butt and peeks down my blouse. For the most part, lunch at Randy Andy's wasn't any worse than lunch at a Hooter's. And the mostly male clientele was pretty well behaved.

Then, half way through the lunch hour, I spotted a familiar face. Apollo was sitting by himself in one of the back booths. He smiled when he saw me approach. "Hi, Sly. How's the meatloaf sandwich today?"

"Which end would you like me to stuff it in?" I growled. I had been making an honest effort to be nice to the customers, but I knew Apollo was directly responsible for my situation.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asked innocently. Damn, he had a handsome face in a boyish sort of way. Even as a man, I had noticed it, but as a woman, I couldn't help but wonder...

No! Apollo was not my friend. "You set me up, you son of a bitch," I told him. "Didn't I read someplace that there was once a God of Truth named Apollo?"

"Speaking," he said with a grin.

"You lied to me!" I insisted. "There was never a movie crew coming here. And you could have warned me what would happen if I brought drugs into Ovid. You knew all of this was going to happen."

"Not exactly," he clarified, "but I knew what would happen if you didn't come to Ovid."

He slid a copy of Variety in front of me. It almost felt like home to see the trade paper of the entertainment industry in front of me. Then, I looked at the date. It was date two months from the present date.

"What kind of a joke is this?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No joke. Just check the page I have marked."

I opened the paper. It was the obituaries page. The name Phillip T. Malone was half way down the column. I dropped the paper to the floor. "This isn't funny," I muttered.

"It isn't meant to be," was his rejoinder. "I assure you, it's real. Or at least, it would have been if Phillip Malone still existed. It says you died of a drug overdose. That's a rough way to go, Sly. Ovid was your only chance."

"You could have told me," I said softly, feeling tears form in my eyes. I

think I was crying for the loss of an old friend—me.

“You wouldn’t have believed me. I really did have a movie set up for here, but when you ceased to exist, time changed. The crew is working on other things. They’ve never heard of Phil Malone since he never existed. As far as what the Judge did to you, I’ll admit your possession of drugs probably had something to do with his choice for your new identity, but if I had told you not to bring them, would you have listened?”

I wanted to answer him, but all that came out was a choked sob. He gently took my arm. “Sly, when you were Phil, believe me, I was your best friend. Sometimes, I think I may have been your only friend. Look, give this life a fair shot. There’s an old quote—I believe from the Koran—that says God does not close one door without opening another.”

“Or the gods,” I managed.

“Or the gods,” he agreed.

More customers were coming in, so I wasn’t able to talk to him anymore. I turned to take care of another table. Then, remembering that I hadn’t taken his order, I turned back, but he was gone, as if he had never even been there. Damn, I wished these gods would stop doing that.

Shelly took me home again for the afternoon break. I had to admit to myself that I was really anxious to get back to Johnny. Just being with the little guy seemed to give some purpose to this whole mess. When he was at my breast, it was as if the whole world made some sort of perverse sense. I was really getting to enjoy him.

I took him outside to get some fresh air. In a grassy area near the trailers, he toddled under the trees, happy as a little clam—until a squirrel suddenly rushed by, frightening him. He let out a screech so loud it brought Callie back out of her trailer where she had gone when I returned home.

“Don’t worry, Callie,” I said picking him up. “He just saw a squirrel.

He'll be okay."

The squirrel sat perched on the limb of an old oak tree, chittering a warning at us as he braced to run in case of danger. I found myself idly wondering if the little fellow was another of the Judge's victims. If he was, I suppose there really were worse fates than becoming a cocktail waitress. Johnny shrank in my arms, whimpering.

"Easy little guy," I cooed to him. "It's just a squirrel. That's just Sammy the Squirrel. Can you say 'hi' to Sammy?"

His little blue eyes got wider. I had given the squirrel a name. Something with a name didn't seem quite as frightening. "H-hi," he managed, or something close to 'hi.' He was still a baby in most ways, just learning to be a toddler.

"Maybe you could tell him a story about Sammy," Callie urged.

"Good idea," I agreed, feeling Johnny's fear ebb away. "Sammy is a smart little squirrel, but sometimes he doesn't always get along with the other squirrels..." Before I knew it, I was spinning a tale of Sammy the Smart Little Squirrel. He was on a quest, it seemed, to find his long-lost father. Within minutes, Johnny was smiling again. I took him back inside for his nap.

When I got him to sleep, which required a little nursing, I settled in on my dilapidated couch while Callie watched me from over her knitting. I was exhausted and still had all evening to work.

"That was a nice little story you told him," Callie commented.

"Yeah. It's a little like a story I wrote once." It was, too. It was sort of the children's version of 'A Night in Olympus.' I felt like a plagiarist, but what the heck. After all, I had actually written the story, even if it was in a different existence. Besides, nobody remembered the story anyway. It disappeared with all traces when Phil Malone ceased to exist.

"It has a nice ring to it," she continued. "You should write it down."

"Write it down?" I laughed. "It was just a little tale to help Johnny understand what animals are all about."

“Ain’t that what all children’s stories are?” she asked. “Ain’t they just a way to explain the real world to the little ones?”

I smiled. “I’m not even sure Johnny is old enough to understand the story I was telling him.”

“They understand a lot more than you think,” she told me. “Take it from me. You ought to write that down.”

“I’ll think about it,” I told her. I really didn’t plan to do it, though. Trying to make ends meet and raise Johnny were both full-time jobs, it seemed. I didn’t have time to be a writer.

Maybe that’s what I should have been all along, I thought to myself. Writing was my first love. It was from writing that I got into directing. Directing just seemed to be where it was at. I had a lot more power as a director. Maybe I would have been happier as just a writer. Maybe if I had just written ‘A Night in Olympus’ and let a better director run the movie, it might have been more of a commercial success. All it had really gotten me was a chance to fail at making a boxing movie that nobody even remembered. I hoped that movie disappeared with the rest of Phil Malone.

I didn’t have much time to think about it, though. Shelly picked me up and we headed back to work together as I reluctantly left Johnny behind with Callie. Thank god for Callie. At least Johnny was in good hands. I had never before realized the awesome responsibility of being a parent—particularly a mother. When I left Johnny behind, it was almost as if I was leaving a part of myself in that trailer.

Business on Thursday evening was good. I didn’t have much time to think about my situation or to worry about my mysterious contact. I have to admit, I actually started having a little fun. I had pretty much gotten over my embarrassment about being a girl, and I was starting to feel normal with my long hair brushing my neck and my swaying breasts. I still was a little unsteady on my high heels, and the tightness of my short skirt didn’t improve my balance. At least when I had to sit, it was easy to cross my legs demurely since there was no male equipment to get squeezed in the process. I would have given a lot to

have had my male organs back, but I had to admit some things were easier without dick and the gang getting in the way.

I had started to think of my time as Sylvia as a role like the ones in some of my movies. I began to try different things—friendly smiles thrown over my shoulder, an extra wiggle in my walk, a silly giggle. The guys ate it up, and when they ate it up, the tips rolled in.

I was reminded of my double-agent role when a group of people from Vulman Industries came in. There were about ten of them, laughing and talking. They put a couple of tables together and began to order. Two of them really caught my eye. The first was a great looking guy (now where had that description come from?) who appeared to be the leader of the group. He even made sure I gave him the tab. The other was a woman seated next to him—very close to him, in fact. She was very dark—probably Indian or Hispanic, I thought—dressed in a business suit. She had an engagement ring the size of a small state on her hand, and the way she cuddled up to the good looking guy—I think she called him Darren—it was pretty obvious who had given her the rock.

I was sure I had struck pay dirt. These weren't just lowly workers at Vulman—whatever Vulman was. Instead, they appeared to be executives and engineers. Well, the Judge had told me to agree to be a spy. Here I was—Sly the spy. So I listened to what they had to say. Most of it was technical jargon, so I understood about a quarter of it. Apparently, this Vulman Industries was a defense contractor. They made some sort of device that allowed jets to fly longer and faster. I hoped my contact didn't expect me to memorize much of the information since I didn't have the slightest idea what was important and what wasn't. Apparently the Judge wasn't worried about what I told the contact. Otherwise, he would have told me to hold back information.

Ironically, by taking good care of the Vulman people just so I could hear what they were saying, I got a very nice tip for being so attentive. This Darren guy had given me twenty-five bucks.

“What did you do? Give him a blow job?” Marty asked crudely when

he saw the cash.

“Right, Marty,” I said condescendingly. Considering the fact that Marty was apparently a god, he was in the lower quartile of the gods. He was as much a competent god as Homer Simpson was a competent nuclear power technician. I wondered which god he was.

Wait a minute, I thought. Bachman. Bacchus. Sure, it fit. Wasn’t Bacchus the fat little wino that fell off the donkey in Fantasia? Well, he might not be fat, but he was certainly around booze. I suppose it figured. Some god. I suddenly realized that I probably needed to bone up on my mythology if I was going to be a resident of Ovid. How many other gods were there? Let’s see... the Judge was Jupiter, Apollo was, well, Apollo. Then there was Marty, or Bacchus. What about that cop—Officer Mercer? Mercer—Mercury? Wasn’t he the dude with the wings on his feet? Well, I guessed it made some sense. A successful cop needed to be everywhere at once. Who better than the fleetest of the gods?

“Well, take care of that new guy who just came in,” Marty ordered with a nod to a newly occupied table. My heart stopped. It was my contact. Well, time to play James Bond, I thought. Or rather Jane Bond.

He looked up at me with his dark eyes. The wan smile was there again. “Well, have you given any thought to my proposal?”

I nodded. “We have a deal.”

His eyes squeezed shut, almost cat-like. “You’ve made a good decision. You won’t regret it.”

I already regretted it, even if I was playing double agent. The Judge was powerful—there was no denying that. But there was a power behind those dark eyes as well—a power beyond mortal understanding. This man—if he was a man—could probably do as much to me as the Judge had done. I was in the middle of some divine war. I felt like the island peoples of the Pacific must have felt in the Second World War when the technically advanced Japanese and Allies wreaked havoc in their lives. I was being asked to choose sides in a conflict I could never hope to understand.

“So what do I do now?” I asked.

“Have you seen anyone from Vulman Industries?” he asked.

“There were some in here earlier, but they’ve left,” I replied. “I didn’t understand much of what they were talking about.”

“Let’s see,” he said softly, placing a hand on my bare arm. There was a sudden disorientation. Then, I could see and hear what had happened earlier in the evening. The entire conversation I had heard with the Vulman people was replayed. They were discussing a flight control system far more advanced than anything that existed. They were not terribly detailed in their comments, but I could tell that they were discussing something secret. Even when they barely whispered, it was as if I could hear every word they said.

Then, suddenly, time returned to normal. I looked around, embarrassed. I had been in a trance for—what?—thirty minutes or so, I was certain.

“Don’t worry,” he told me, apparently reading my concern. “You were only in the trance for a few seconds. Time has a way of moving slowly when you report to me. No one suspects a thing.”

Then, he reached inside his shirt pocket, pulling out a set of car keys held together by twisted wire. “Consider this a bonus,” he explained. “Your car is now paid for. It’s outside in the parking lot.”

I took the keys and stared at them, as if they were made of solid gold. I had wheels! I might still be Sly the barmaid, but I could at least get around Ovid without asking for someone’s help. I wondered what would happen if I just got into the car and headed out of town. I probably wouldn’t be able to do it, I realized. I was probably stuck in this town forever. Besides, what would I do with Johnny? So I guessed I was stuck. At least I had a car.

Then another thought struck me. Why hadn’t the Judge done this for me? I had agreed to help him. Had I really picked the right side? The stranger offered the carrot while the Judge offered only the stick. No, I realized as I turned back to him. My decision had been made. It was

bad enough being a double agent. Being a triple agent would be bad—maybe even fatal. “Did you want something...?” I started to ask, but there was no one there. He had disappeared without a trace. I wished he would stop doing that!

I was exhausted when we closed up, but it had been another goodnight for tips. Plus, I had my car. It wasn’t exactly my black BMW 740i, but I was feeling well-pleased as I scooted into the old Ford Tempo. I had no trouble finding the trailer park. After all, the population of Ovid couldn’t have been more than about fifteen thousand, so it wasn’t easy to get lost.

Callie was waiting for me. She had Johnny in her arms. He was furiously sucking on a bottle, little tears in his tiny eyes.

“Honey, I’m glad to see you!” she sighed. “He just don’t want to go to bed ’til he sees his mama.”

“Oh, come here,” I laughed with arms outstretched. It was actually nice to have somebody waiting up at home for me. Even as tired as I was, it seemed to make the whole day worthwhile.

Callie went home, leaving me with Johnny. He was sharp enough to decide he had had enough of the bottle and demand the real thing. I sat down and pulled out a breast with practiced ease, and he happily sucked on it until sleep claimed him.

It was odd how quickly things which had seemed unbelievably strange only a day before were suddenly becoming normal. Breastfeeding, peeing while sitting down, makeup, and wearing heels were all almost normal. It was a life I wouldn’t have chosen for myself, but it was becoming a life I felt I could tolerate. Of course, I would have preferred another job. Being a waitress in a bar wasn’t my idea of a high class career.

Maybe I could get another job, I thought after I had put Johnny to bed and gotten into a short nightie to go to bed myself. No, I realized. That wasn’t likely. I had seen the way other women in Ovid looked at me. As far as they were concerned, I might as well be a cheap whore. I was the trashy broad with the big boobs who wiggled her ass for tips

down at Randy Andy's. I kept their husbands and boyfriends out late, drinking beer and leering at my long legs. I was their little sexual fantasy who lived in a trailer and had kids out of wedlock. Why, they wouldn't have been surprised to find my picture in the latest issue of Hustler their men kept hidden in the basement under the sheets of sandpaper. No woman in Ovid would hire me, I was sure. And god help the man who hired me when his wife or girlfriend found out.

I also doubted if there was a job in Ovid I was qualified for which would pay more. Marty paid Shelly and me a pittance, but when you added the tips on top of our wages, we didn't do too badly. In a strange way, the Judge had been consistent when he had assigned me a role, I thought. As Phil Malone, I had peddled sex and vice. Oh, my films weren't really what you would call hardcore, but they weren't the sort of things you'd show to the kiddies. Now, as Sylvia Connors, I was doing the same thing. I was peddling soft porn every time I wiggled my ass, and to some, booze is as much of a vice as porn. Ironical, wasn't it?

I fell asleep with that thought. It may have had something to do with my dreams.

I woke up the next morning with a start. I had been dreaming. I was making a film in the dream. It was one of those soft porn films I did so well. Only this time, I wasn't in the director's chair. Instead, it was me on that bed, looking down at the guy with the unnaturally long dick, moving my long-nailed hands breathlessly over his body. Then things were about to go hardcore, as I sat up ready to ride him, my hands reaching down for his...

I gasped. I was awake. There was no man with a long... long... No, there was no man in my bed. I felt strange, though. There was a wetness between my legs. Wonderful, I thought. Girls have wet dreams, too—only they're really wet.

As I got ready to face the day, I kept thinking about that dream. Apparently, I was going to be your run-of-the-mill heterosexual girl. I had already begun to look at guys as being sexy, although I wasn't sure I was ready to play hide the salami with one. Girls, on the other

hand, I seemed to be no longer interested in—at least from a sexual standpoint. Oh, I still looked at them, but more from a perspective of how they dressed or did their hair or makeup.

So it was one Sylvia Conners, single mom and waitress extraordinaire who puttered around the trailer that morning. I handed Johnny off to Callie and headed off to work with an actual smile on my face. Every day seemed to be more... normal.

Until that night.

Friday night was party night in Ovid, just like it is in every other town in the country. Most people had their forty hours in. Now, it was two days of kicking back, doing the yard work, watching a baseball game, or just sitting around on the back patio listening to tunes. First, though, was the ritual of TGIF.

Randy Andy's was really hopping. Even Marty had to take a few drink orders as the tables filled up, pulling Pepe out of the kitchen to pull beers and wash the glasses behind the counter. Nobody was ordering anything from the kitchen anyway. Taco chips and salsa and a bowl of beer nuts and the Friday crowd was happy. More Vulman folks wandered in. I tried to pick up on their conversations, but I was too busy to concentrate on them. So when my mysterious friend came in that night near closing, I had little to give him.

"You need to stay closer to them," he told me as another table of rowdy drunks staggered out to their cars.

"Look," I told him, "you try it. Everybody was thirsty tonight. I couldn't just park by their table and listen in." I wasn't very pleasant when I talked to him. I was tired. My feet ached and my arms were sore from carrying trays loaded with pitchers of cheap beer. I found myself actually glad there was no smoking in Ovid. If I had had to breathe a fog of cigarette smoke while running around, I would probably be wheezing all evening.

"It is in your best interests to cooperate with me," he said between clenched teeth. "You have no idea the eventual fate the Judge has in store for you if I don't change you back."

“What fate?” I asked, suddenly interested—and concerned.

“With every passing day,” he began, “you will become more and more the person you have been transformed into. Sylvia Connors was little more than an ignorant tramp. Her whelp is only the first of many she will bear—all without the presence of a father. Is that what you want?”

“But I won’t...”

“You won’t have a choice. Even now, your body is being filled with new desires, new needs.”

He was right. I could actually feel them. It was like the dream that morning, only stronger. With every passing moment, my sexual orientation was changing. Curious glances at men were becoming longer stares. More than once I had idly speculated at what one of my male customers had under the hood, especially when I noticed something rising in their pants as they looked at my breasts.

“Come with me and I’ll show you,” he said, his voice hypnotic.

“I can’t,” I protested. “We haven’t closed yet.” Besides, I didn’t want to be shown anything—especially by this... creature.

“You won’t be missed,” he replied, brushing the back of my hand, producing an electric thrill through my body.

“But...”

“No buts,” he ordered softly. “Come.”

So that was how I lost my virginity. I suppose I wasn’t technically a virgin any way you sliced it. As a man, I had lost it at fifteen. Sylvia was obviously not a virgin, unless Johnny was the Second Coming. No, I wasn’t a virgin, but it was the first time I had sex as a woman. And I didn’t like it one bit.

Oh, I know, the sensations were enthralling, but there I was, practically in heat, in the small back seat of my own car, grunting and panting as the stranger entered me. He was rough and insistent, and only my hypnotically weakened will and small female body stood in his path. It was not ‘making love.’ Instead, it was ‘having sex.’

As he finished with me, I lay there, still mostly clothed although dishevelled, in a pool of my own sweat. I know, ladies don't sweat—they perspire, but I was no lady. It was sweat, partially from our activity and partially from the heat of the car. Yes, there had been a moment of physical pleasure. It was like nothing I could ever have imagined as a man. But in my mind, I was cheapened. He had hypnotized me into this and might as well have raped me. I was sore and sticky. My god, what if he had actually gotten me pregnant?

“See what you have to look forward to?” he taunted me. I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just glared at him. “This will be your life, Sylvia,” he went on. “With some men, you will find a moment of love, but with most, it will be animal passion. You will be penetrated in every possible way.”

I shuddered as I thought of that. Involuntarily, I looked down at his penis. As a man, I had enjoyed a good blowjob every now and then. Would I now be expected to give them? Of course I would. I pressed my lips tightly together, feeling them slide over the thin layer of lipstick. He rewarded me with an evil smile as he watched my lips. “You will come to enjoy them,” he told me, reading my thoughts by noting the motion of my eyes. “Shall we try one now?”

“Sly!”

It was Shelly. She was out in the parking lot.

“Over here!” I practically screamed.

She rushed over to the car. “Are you all right?” she asked. “What are you doing in the back seat?”

It should have been obvious, I thought, but I suddenly realized I was alone. For once, I was thankful for that little disappearing act these beings all seemed to have.

“Marty said you had to go home. You weren't feeling well. It's not your time of the month, is it?”

“N... no,” I managed. “I was just looking for a comb. I thought maybe it fell back here.” So Marty knew I had left. Was he covering for the

stranger, or had he been influenced hypnotically?

She studied me. "Are you sure you're all right?"

I gave her a smile I didn't feel. "I'm fine."

"Okay," she said, not really believing me. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Right."

As she walked away, I half-expected the stranger to reappear in my back seat next to me and start up where he left off. With a sigh of relief, I realized that wasn't going to happen. I straightened my clothes out the best I could and drove home.

If Callie noticed there was something wrong, she had the good sense to keep it to herself. I wished her a good night and packed her off. Johnny was asleep, so I was alone. That was when I finally let the tears flow.

I just wasn't cut out to be a girl, I thought to myself. It was as if I was living out the lives of the women I had put on film. There was this waitress in 'Backroad Babe' who made it with a stranger in the back seat of her car—just like me. Of course, she had enjoyed it a lot more than I had. I felt... used. I had never imagined what a woman might feel like after such an experience. I suppose in the truest sense, I hadn't been raped. I had been a willing participant in one sense. If my will had been stronger, maybe I could have fought off the trance. I never ever wanted to do that again, though, I thought as I climbed into bed. Never.

Saturday was bright and sunny. In spite of it, I felt like shit. What had ever possessed me to have sex with that... that... whatever he was. But of course that's exactly what it was—possession. I had been magically forced into the act.

"What's wrong?" Callie asked, seeing me outside my trailer just staring into space.

"Nothing," I lied.

From her expression, I could see she didn't believe me. "So how's that

story of yours going?”

“Story?” I said, coming out of my malaise for a moment.

She shook her head and sighed. “Girl, you just gotta get yourself together. I’m talkin’ about that cute little story about the squirrel you were telling your little lamb. I told you, you should write it down.”

“I haven’t had time,” I told her. It was true. When did I have time to write out a children’s story? I was too busy just working eating and sleeping... and getting poked in the back seat of a Tempo.

“Write... it... down...” she said slowly. “Then next time you’re too tired to make up a story for Johnny, you’ll have one all ready.”

“I’ll try,” I promised.

Saturday wasn’t much of a lunch day at Randy Andy’s, so it turned out Marty didn’t usually have us come in until four to get ready for the evening crowd. In fact, the kitchen was closed Saturday. Marty had a weekend bartender—some kid from the local college—who handled all of the chores until things got busy. By city ordinance all the bars were closed Sunday, so after that night, I would have a little time to recover. My feet and legs needed it. That was a small town for you, I thought. Raise hell on Saturday but no beer sold on Sunday.

In a way, though, I was sorry that I didn’t have to work. I needed to stay busy to take my mind off my sexual encounter. When Johnny was up and fed, I took him out for a little while. He was still too young to get much out of the playground, but he seemed to enjoy the fresh air and sunshine. Then, I took him to a supermarket I had found. It wasn’t exactly a Ralph’s like in California. It was called Duggan’s IGA. At least I was able to pick up enough food to get me through the next few days. Thank god my long years as a bachelor had made me into a halfway decent cook.

I noticed many of the patrons at Duggan’s were staring at me. The men were obviously interested in my body. I caught more than one staring at my breasts when he didn’t think I was noticing. I could almost handle those stares, though. At least they were looks of

appreciation. It was the women's stares that bothered me. They were looking at me as if I had a big red 'A' sewn onto my blouse. I was dressed in a fairly loose blouse and only moderately tight jeans, but they gave me a look that made me feel like I wasn't wearing anything at all. Okay, I thought, so I'm trailer trash—a tramp. I'm an unwed mother who works in a bar and who spends her late nights in the backseat of a car doing the dirty deed.

Please, god, I silently prayed, if you're really out there get me out of this mess. It was a cinch the gods of Ovid weren't going to help me.

When I got home, there was a brand-new gold sports car of a type I hadn't seen before, convertible top down in front of my trailer. I didn't have to guess who was in it.

"Hi, Apollo," I said, looking down into the car.

Apollo grinned. "How you doing, Sly?"

"I see you have your chariot back," I commented, admiring the car and pretending not to notice as Johnny drooled down on it from my arms. Serves him right, I thought.

"You're pissed," he observed, "and I have good news."

"What?"

"Well," he drawled, "tonight is the last night you'll have to play spy. When our friend comes in, just keep him occupied for a few minutes. Then, we'll nab him."

The thought of that slimy son of a bitch being caught actually brought tears to my eyes. Apollo looked at me with concern. "What's wrong, Sly?"

Oh hell, I thought. I had to tell somebody. My sexual encounter was eating me alive. "Come on in," I told him. "I'll feed Johnny and put him down for his nap. Then I'll tell you."

It took me quite a while to tell the story of my little tumble in the back seat. I would pause from embarrassment, then cry from frustration. When I was done, Apollo was sitting on the couch next to me. He tried

to put a comforting arm around me, but I pushed it away, bringing on still more tears. I would have to redo my makeup before I went back to work.

"I never want to have sex again!" I cried. "I hate this! I hate being a woman!"

"I don't blame you," he said quietly.

"You don't?" My tears actually stopped for a moment.

He shook his head. "No, I wouldn't want it. Some of the other gods have tried it, but not me."

"You... you can all shift sex?" I asked.

"Not exactly," he explained. "But the Judge can. If any of us asked him, I'm sure he'd do it for us. I just don't want to be a woman. I hear the sex is so good, I'm not sure I'd have the willpower to change back."

"If that's all that's holding you back," I said bitterly, "then don't worry about it. Take it from me—it's not that great." I nearly began crying again.

"Oh, Sly, you were practically raped," he reminded me. "That was just sex. It wasn't making love."

"I couldn't 'make love' to a man," I protested.

"How do you know?"

"I just couldn't," I replied, this time allowing him to put his arm around me. Before I knew it, he turned my head toward his and our lips met. It was a gentle, chaste kiss, but I felt a tingle down my spine. When he released me, I uttered, "What was that for?"

"That was just to show you that love can be gentle," he murmured.

"What are you talking about?" I whispered, suddenly unsure of myself.

"I don't want you using any magic on me."

"I'm not," he said gently. "It wouldn't be right. But tell me, what did you think?"

“About what?”

“The kiss, of course.”

I felt that tingle again just thinking about the kiss. “I... I...”

Before I could say anything else, he kissed me again. Only this time, the kiss was long and charged with passion. What had been a gentle tingle before was now a shudder through my whole body. What was I doing? I was kissing a... a... man. To make matters worse, I was actually enjoying it.

He said he wasn't using magic on me, and he was the God of Truth, but what is truth? Or to be more to the point, what is magic? Maybe love in all of its forms is magic and maybe it isn't. Whatever it was, I suddenly realized that I loved Apollo. Oh, I don't mean in the permanent sort of way. But as Phil, I had loved him as a friend. Now, I could express my love for him in a different way.

Wordlessly, we walked to my small bedroom. We didn't have to say anything to each other as we removed each other's clothing. There was no torrid passion between us—instead, we were succumbing to a gentle but insistent need. He was hard and ready while I was wet and giving in to a pressure to yield. When he finally entered me, it was nothing like the soiled feeling I had experienced the night before. This felt somehow... right.

Because it was a slow and gentle experience for us both, the experience seemed to go on forever, my body locked in a pattern where each sensation in answer to a need produced still another need until...

“Oh my god!” I breathed, not sure if I was uttering a general explicative or speaking directly to the actual god between my legs. The sensation was like nothing I had ever imagined. Friday night in the car had been rough, and the little pleasure I had experienced from the act was outweighed by the psychological pain of knowing it was just an animal act. In Apollo's arms though, I felt a sense of rebirth. If the Judge had appeared in my bedroom that moment and offered to change me back into a man, I would have emphatically said ‘no.’ I never wanted to lose

the feeling I now had.

As a man, I usually fell asleep after making love. Now, though, as a woman, I was wide-awake, revelling in the ebbing orgasm, delighting in every tingle it gave me. Apollo was awake as well, gently moving his hands over my body, actually heightening the experience.

“That was incredible,” I whispered softly.

He smiled.

My reverie was broken by the sudden wail of a baby. “I’ve got to take care of Johnny,” I told him, reluctant to leave the bed.

Before I left, he took my hand. “Be well,” he said.

I rushed in to find Johnny standing up in his crib, wet and hungry. “Poor little guy,” I cooed, snatching him up to show him to Apollo. But when I got into my bedroom, there was no sign of him. Only the ebbing sensations in my own body were evidence that he had ever been there.

Oh well, I thought as I changed Johnny. Wasn’t that the way I had treated women? Wham! Bam! Thank you, ma’am! No, it wasn’t really like that. The Phil side of me probably wasn’t sensitive enough to understand what Apollo had done for me, but the Sylvia side knew. Apollo had wanted to show me that there could be fulfillment for me as a woman. I was beginning to accept that, I realized, and accept it more each time Johnny’s hungry mouth reached up for my breast.

And there he was, I thought with a smile as he greedily latched on to my nipple. I felt a sense of warmth once more. It wasn’t like my orgasm, but in its own way, it was equally satisfying.

I still had some time before work, so I got Johnny dressed and we made an excursion to the Ovid Public Library. To be honest, I hadn’t been in a library since I was in college, so I didn’t really know what to expect.

The library itself was located about a block from City Hall. It was in an old gray stone building, complete with two small stone lions in front. I know it was my imagination, but the eyes on both of the lions seemed

to follow me as I approached the library steps.

My first impression inside was that the library was small, but as I perused the Mythology and Folklore section, I was pleased to find it well stocked. 'And why shouldn't it be?' I thought. Books on Greek and Roman mythology were like a Who's Who of Ovid.

I found one that seemed to have a pretty good description of the gods. Out of curiosity, I looked up Jupiter. I just scanned the lengthy section on him, but the old boy had quite a varied history. He was accused of more affairs than Bill Clinton, and seemed to be the illegitimate father of about half of the gods. Now, though, he was a straight-laced judge in a small Oklahoma town. Talk about a career change!

Officer Mercer was there, too, as Mercury, the swift messenger of the gods. The book didn't have a lot about Marty, though. Apparently, Bacchus wasn't much of a big fish. Of course, I had a basic knowledge of mythology, gained when I had written 'A Night in Olympus,' but that had been very basic since the magic of the gods was only hinted at in the film. I was learning all sorts of details about the gods I had never known before. I was just turning to the section on Apollo when Johnny let out a demanding grunt. I looked up to see that other library patrons were giving me cold looks that said I should keep my kid quiet in the library.

I looked over to see what he had caught his interest. It was the children's section, highlighted by a cut-out of a happy cat in a red and white hat holding a Dr Seuss book.

"Oh, all right," I told him. "Let's see if they have a book for you, too."

The section brought back memories. There were books that I remembered reading but hadn't seen since I was a small child. As I looked through them, I kept comparing them to the story of Sammy the Smart Squirrel that I had been telling Johnny. The thought that kept running through my mind was that the story of Sammy was every bit as good as many of these books. I hadn't been a bad artist in college. I thought if I wanted to, I could even illustrate a book. Well, maybe someday I would get around to it. I picked up three books for

little Johnny.

I wasn't surprised to find out that Sylvia Connors did not have a library card. I quickly filled out an application for one while the librarian stared at me as if I were a vegetarian trying to order a steak. Apparently, barmaids weren't expected to read in Ovid. Well, screw them. I'd read *War and Peace* in the original Russian if I thought it would get their goats.

I got back to my trailer and dropped Johnny off with Callie. The time had come for me to go to work. I had mixed feelings about what was supposed to happen that evening. On one hand, I was proving my loyalty to the Judge. That should be worth something, I thought. Okay, so he wouldn't change me back, but maybe he could use a little of his magic to give me a little respect. I could continue to be Sylvia, but maybe Sylvia could be a teacher or a secretary or a bank teller. There was no reason why he had to leave me as a waitress in a bar.

On the other hand, though, I might have picked the wrong side if I had any hope of getting my old life back. Maybe my contact did have the power to change me back. I might be giving up my only opportunity to ever return to my old life again.

I think it was at that moment that I realized that although I didn't want to be a waitress in a bar for the rest of my life, I wasn't too sure I wanted my old life back. In the first place, it might kill me. Even if I could avoid the drug overdose that Apollo said was to kill me, what did I have to look forward to? I was middle-aged, alone, a virtual failure in my profession, reduced to cranking out cheap, sleazy films to satisfy a prurient, indiscriminating audience. And the worst thing about having my old life back would be that I would lose Johnny.

'Ah, Johnny,' I thought as I drove to work. I loved to see him smile, and when I heard him cry, it nearly broke my heart. I could never remember being so close to anyone else in my entire life. I wanted to see him grow and learn. I wanted to be there his first day in school. I wanted to teach him how to be the man I had failed to be. I wanted... I wanted to be his... mother.

“You’re late!” Marty growled. Actually, I wasn’t, but Marty always set his clocks a few minutes early so he could hustle everyone out at closing time.

“Sorry, Marty,” I replied contritely. There was no sense in arguing with him. I hit the deck running. The place was already starting to fill up, and many of the patrons looked like they were planning to spend the entire evening.

There was a baseball game on TV in each of the rooms and one over the bar itself. The Kansas City Royals were playing a series with the Texas Rangers. Since Ovid was about halfway between the two, there were plenty of fans of each team. T-shirts and ball caps were well in evidence, and the beer was flowing freely. Bets were being placed on practically every pitch and the winnings were often taken in more beer.

By the time the game ended, the bar was really rocking. Shelly and I were running our legs off, and even with Marty helping while his weekend bartender drew more pitchers of beer, we could barely keep up. The tips were great, though. The winners on the baseball bets were generous with their tips, and even the losers tipped well, just to see the smiles on Shelly’s and my face.

I recognized some of the Vulman crowd. There were at least two tables with Vulman employees and another two with construction workers from Vulman. I didn’t get to listen to any of them, though. I was too busy waiting other tables. Besides, I thought, after tonight, it didn’t matter. My mysterious contact would be in the custody of the Judge.

He came in once again as the crowd began to thin. There was no concern on his face. He hadn’t a clue that he was about to be apprehended. Instead, he leered at me as he slipped into an empty booth. He motioned for me to come to his table as a king would summon a servant. I did his bidding, though. I didn’t want anything to look suspicious.

“Any more information for me tonight, my dear?” he asked

“It’s been pretty busy,” I told him truthfully.

“Yes,” he drawled, rather disappointed. “Well, perhaps next week will be better. By the way, my employers are well pleased with what you have given them so far. In another week, we will have everything we need. I can change you back then. You’ll be back in Hollywood before you know it.”

“As Phil Malone?” I asked. A few days before, I would have been thrilled with the news. Of course, that was before I realized who Phil Malone—who I—had been.

He smiled a condescending smile. “Of course, my dear. Of course, for the remainder of the week, I would be happy to help you to explore your feminine side.”

“I’m afraid you won’t get the chance, Lycus.” It was the voice of Officer Mercer. I hadn’t seen him come in, but suddenly, he was standing by the bar. Strangely, none of the other bar patrons seemed to have heard him. They continued to laugh and drink and play pool as if nothing was going on.

“Merc...” the man he had called Lycus started to say before nearly strangling on the word.

“No names, please,” Officer Mercer said with a faint smile.

Lycus’s eyes narrowed as he looked at me. “This is your doing, isn’t it? What did they offer you? I know the Judge. He would never agree to change you back. Only I would have done that. So have you decided that you like being a little trollop with a little brat at your breast? Then so be it!”

He began to motion his hands at me, but Officer Mercer stepped in front of me to protect me. Then, at the last second, Lycus’s gesture was directed not at me but at himself. It was as if he was suddenly changed from a three-dimensional image to a two-dimensional one. Then that image crumpled itself up into a ball, continually folding in on itself until it had disappeared with a loud pop.

Officer Mercer turned to Marty who was standing stunned by the bar. “I thought I told you to suppress all inter-dimensional pathways in the

bar!" he growled.

"I did!" Marty protested. "There wasn't any way in or out of this place except the doors. I checked myself."

Officer Mercer closed his eyes and moved his head from side to side for a moment. Then he sighed, "All right, Marty. You're right. He must have found some way around your spell."

Marty relaxed visibly. I was beginning to suspect that some of the gods didn't trust Marty any more than I did.

"Can I start time again?" Marty asked, gesturing at the frozen figures around the room.

Officer Mercer gave a wave of his arm. "Yes, yes. Go ahead. We can't accomplish anything else tonight. The Judge will be most disappointed."

"Wait a minute," I said to Officer Mercer as he turned to leave. "What just happened here? Who was that guy and what is this all about?"

"You don't have any need to know, Ms. Connors," he told me.

"Now wait just a minute," I insisted. "I risked my neck for you and your Judge. He could have done anything to me. As it was, he practically raped me. What if he comes back? I'm not exactly on his Christmas card list, you know."

"We will protect you from him and his allies," Officer Mercer assured me as the normal noise and activity in the bar resumed. "You have nothing to fear."

"Hey, Sly!" a voice called out from one of the tables. "We're getting dry over here. How about another pitcher?"

"In a minute," I called over my shoulder. Time had apparently started up again. Then, I turned back to talk to Officer Mercer, but he was gone. I looked at Marty. He had returned to taking care of the customers. Everyone in the place looked as if nothing had happened. I suppose for most of them, nothing really had happened.

"Marty," I called, "what's going on?"

He shook his head. "Later, Sly, after we close. Now get back to work!"

I spent the rest of the evening looking nervously over my shoulder. I half expected this Lycus to come charging back into the place, throwing spells around like a pitcher at a baseball game. He said he could change me back. Well, that was out the window now, but that didn't mean he couldn't change me into something else. I had already seen what the Judge could do to me when he was angry. The look Lycus had given me before he disappeared was worse than the Judge's anger. If the Judge was willing to turn me into a bimbo in heat, what would Lycus do? It wasn't a pleasant thought.

Finally, we closed. Only Marty and I were left in the bar. I really didn't trust Marty. I had half-expected him to put a move on me ever since I had started working there. He hadn't, though, and there was no evidence that he had ever put a move on Shelly either. He seemed content to work us to death. He was an equal opportunity slave driver.

Marty poured himself a beer. "Want one?" he asked.

"No thanks," I replied. Funny, but I really had had no desire to drink since my transformation. Something in the back of my mind had told me that as long as I was breastfeeding, alcohol was a bad idea. Considering my bad habits as Phil Malone, I should have craved the stuff, but I didn't. In fact, this body seemed to lack any interest in drugs or cigarettes as well. I might be female now, but I had never been healthier.

"Rough night," he commented, taking a sip of his beer as he leaned back against the bar.

I sat on one of the bar stools and tried to figure out how to lean forward to talk to him without giving him a great view of my breasts. No way to avoid it, I decided, relaxing a little. "So what was this all about, Marty?"

He shook his head. "I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?"

"Look, Sly, some of this is a mystery to me, too. I take it you know who

I am?"

I nodded. "I guess I can't say it, though."

"You can right now," he explained. "Some of us can grant dispensation."

"Then you're Bacchus."

"I think I prefer the Greek—Dionysus. The Greeks really appreciated us more than the Romans," he explained. "So you know that Ovid is run by the Olympians?"

I nodded.

"Have you ever heard of the Titans?"

"I heard of them," I replied, "and I got a book out of the library today and read up a little more on them. As I understand it, they were the original gods and Jupiter and his gods overthrew them."

"That's something of an oversimplification, but it gets the main idea across," he commented. "I wasn't around then. Some of the senior gods talk about it like your older people talk about the Second World War. In any case, it was one hell of a war."

"But I thought the old gods were killed," I pointed out.

He shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. We aren't really sure. Something of them remains. It may be the Titans themselves, or it may be their children. We know some of their children survived, and one even worked for me for a time." He gave a tired smile. "That's why some of the Olympians think I may have had something to do with them. Believe me, I'm not that stupid."

No, he wasn't, I thought. But Marty was sly. He deserved that name instead of me. For him, it was an apt description. I suspected that if there was a conflict, Marty would do his best to be on the winning side, regardless of any ideals he may have had.

"And there is another possibility," Marty went on. "It is just possible that there is another line of gods."

“Another line?” I repeated.

He nodded. “Yes. All of the gods you humans know came from one major line of the Titans. But there were other Titans with many offspring. Some survived the uprising but weren’t part of the conflict. You may have heard of some of them. Atlas and Prometheus come to mind.”

“So now I’ve crossed them, whoever they are,” I said slowly, as much to myself as to Marty.

“Yes, you have.”

It’s funny. I was probably in danger of their revenge, but I wasn’t all that worried about myself. Instead, I was worried about what they might do to Johnny. Marty must have read the concern in my face, for he assured me, “Sly, you haven’t got anything to worry about. Have you ever played chess?”

“I little,” I replied. With a smile, I added, “I was always more a poker kind of guy.”

“Well, in chess, you’re a pawn. You can be valuable when the game is being played on your side of the board, but much of the time, you aren’t worth the effort to take. Whoever or whatever we’re up against won’t bother with you,” Marty explained. “At least not unless the game moves in your direction again, but I don’t think it will.”

That was both a relief and an insult, I realized. I’m sure Marty meant it in the best way, but it was also a little disturbing to think I was out of the game. At least I had enjoyed a little excitement for a couple of days. Now, my world would be reduced to serving boozehounds most of the day. At least my time with Johnny was becoming enjoyable. I thought I could actually enjoy raising the little guy. Of course, it would have been fun to raise him as his father, playing ball with him and doing guy things. But it wasn’t so bad to be his mother, either. As Bill Cosby once observed, as a father, you play ball with your son, and then when he reaches the big time, the first thing he says when the camera zooms in on him is “Hi, Mom!” Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad after all.

"You look beat," Callie observed when I got home.

"I am," I admitted. I wanted to tell her what had happened, but I knew I couldn't. The gods didn't want mere mortals discussing their business. I plopped down on the couch next to her, rubbing my aching feet.

Callie shook her head. "That Marty Bachman—I hear he's a real slave driver. Makes you gals wear those high heels and all. You oughta tell him you ain't gonna do it anymore."

"And he'd fire us in a heartbeat," I countered.

"I doubt that. Not too many folks around these parts would put up with working for him."

"Maybe," I conceded, "but I'm stuck here now. I realize that. I'm going to be Sylvia Connors for the rest of my life, and I need a pay check. If that means I have to destroy my feet while I serve beer at Randy Andy's, then I guess I don't have much of a choice."

She chuckled, rising to her feet and gathering her things. "Don't be so hard on yourself, Sly. You could do lots of things. Just 'cause that Marty Bachman tells you you can't doesn't mean a thing. Why, I'll bet you could be anything you wanted."

"Like what?"

She thought for a moment. "Well, if you polished up that story about the squirrel you started writing, I'll bet you could be a writer."

"And if I were a blonde, I could be Meg Ryan," I said sarcastically.

"Just don't sell yourself short," she chuckled starting to leave. Then she stopped. "Oh, I almost forgot. While you were at work, a fine looking guy dropped off a note for you."

She handed me a sealed letter. It was addressed simply to 'Sly' but I could tell from just those three letters that it was Apollo's handwriting.

"Thanks," I told her. After she was gone, I opened the letter, curious about why Apollo would be writing me. I read:

Dear Sly,

It's time for me to move on. I've seen all the relatives and talked about old times, but a town like Ovid could never hold me down. I didn't want to leave, though, without letting you know. I'm not much good at person-to-person goodbyes, so this letter will have to do.

When we first met, I saw great potential in you. No, not the potential you think. You were in no position to achieve your potential when we were in California. Believe it or not, your potential can only be achieved here in Ovid.

How? You say. Well, you'll have to figure that out for yourself.

We'll meet again someday, I'm sure. Until then, be well, Sly.

Love,

Apollo

Well wasn't that a kick in the pants? I thought—if I still wore pants. He made love to me and left town. Why not? I was just a small-town girl from the wrong side of the tracks, and he was a... god. No, I realized. There was more to it than that. He had taken the time to teach me that 'making love' and 'having sex' weren't really the same thing. In fact, if I thought about it, I 'made love' maybe for the first time in my entire life—male and female—when I was with him. Besides, he was the God of Truth. If he said we'd meet again, we would. I would always have a special place in my heart for him, no matter where my path led me.

There was no more time to think about him, though. The other man in my life was crying. He needed his mother. Woman's work is never done. How true, I thought, as I went to his room.

I would have slept in on Sunday, but when you're the mother of a would-be toddler, there's no such luck. The little guy was up at the break of dawn, and I was there with him. After a nice breakfast of oatmeal and pureed fruit, he settled down for a nice long drink of warm mother's milk. As I watched the little urchin sucking away, I felt another wave of contentment almost equal to his. He was a little darling. Well, I hadn't been a family man, but it looked as if I was destined to be a family woman.

When he had finished, I got one of the library books I had picked up the day before. He seemed to like having me read to him, and he was delighted with the pictures. I couldn't help but think, though, that the story I had been telling him about Sammy Squirrel was every bit as good. And although I wasn't the greatest artist in the world, I had enough talent to illustrate a children's book. Maybe Callie was right. What the heck. It couldn't hurt.

While Johnny played, I searched my trailer for something to write on. I had no computer, so I hoped there would be at least an old typewriter available. No such luck. Maybe Callie had one.

She did, and I could see by the look on her face that she was pleased I had decided to write. "Do you want me to watch Johnny while you write?" she asked me.

"No," I replied with a smile. "He's really the one I'm writing for."

I worked like a demon all day. Fortunately, I had the basis of a plot already laid out. This was to be the children's version of 'A Night in Olympus,' only instead of a god, Sammy the Smart Little Squirrel and his friend, Sally the Sweet Little Squirrel were searching for Sammy's father, King of the Squirrels. I chuckled to myself as I wrote, realizing how ironic it was that a story like 'A Night in Olympus' which had made the critics rave could be so easily changed into a children's story.

By dinnertime, it was done. Well, the writing was done. I had only roughed out three good illustrations—one of Acorn City where the squirrels all lived, one of Sammy and Sally walking hand in hand through the forest, and one of the King of the Squirrels, resting on his throne. I thought they were pretty good.

"These aren't just good," Callie said as she looked at them. "These are great! And the story—honey, I ain't never seen a children's book this good before. You've got to send this in."

"Send it in?" I echoed.

"To a publisher, child! This book is that good. It might even win a prize. You ever hear of the Newberry Prize?"

I shook my head.

"It's a prize for children's literature. I got a big envelope over at my place. We'll send this off and see what the publishers think."

"But shouldn't we make a copy first?" I asked, actually getting a little excited about it myself.

"I'll take care of it," she grinned.

There was a sudden knock at the door. When I looked out, I saw the serious face of Officer Mercer, his eyes still covered by his reflective sunglasses even though the sun was going down. "Ms. Conners..." he began.

"Yes, Officer?" I replied, stepping outside and trying to look dignified as I stood there in a rumpled T-shirt and denim cut-offs, looking for all the world like a high school coed.

"I've just come from the Judge."

The Judge? Had I done something wrong? Was I going to be blamed for the escape of Lycus?

"He asked me to convey to you his thanks for your help these last few days." With that, he nodded and turned to go.

"Wait a minute!" I called. He turned. "Is that all?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said dryly. "That's all."

I didn't know what to say. I mean, I hadn't expected a reward or anything. But somehow, the abrupt thanks and sudden dismissal seemed a little cold. Before I could think of anything to say, Callie called out to him, "Oh, Officer Mercer?"

Officer Mercer turned. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I wonder if you could take this for me and mail it?" She was holding my manuscript in her hand. "Of course, we'll need a copy of it. Then just put the original in this envelope. It's already made out."

Officer Mercer looked reluctant. I gave Callie a 'what are you doing?' look. "Trust me, sweetheart," she said softly.

Almost reluctantly, he accepted the manuscript. “When does this need to be delivered?”

“As soon as you can,” Callie replied with a satisfied smile.

With no change of expression, Officer Mercer replied, “I’ll take care of it.”

As he drove away, I looked at Callie. “How did you do that? He’s a cop—not a messenger.”

“Oh, isn’t he a messenger?” she asked coyly. Yes, she was right. We couldn’t speak of it—we both realized that. But Officer Mercer was Mercury, the fleetest of the gods. Jupiter had often used him as a messenger. And now here he was, acting as my messenger.

“But how did you...” my voice trailed off. I was going to ask her how she could get Officer Mercer to act in his role of messenger, but the answer was obvious. I looked into her soft brown eyes, not sure what to say. She just smiled at me and said, “Don’t concern yourself with it, child. It’ll be all clear to you in the morning. Right now, you’ve had a long day. You’d better see to that little boy of yours and get some rest. You’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

I wanted to question Callie. There was something suspiciously powerful about the way she had ordered Officer Mercer to take the manuscript. Was she one of them? I didn’t get the chance to ask her, though. Instead, I just turned and went back inside. I don’t really remember going inside. In fact, I don’t really remember the rest of the evening. The next thing I remembered was being awakened by the sound of Johnny crying in his crib. It was morning, I realized. How long had I slept? It was as if I had spent the rest of Sunday evening in a trance.

Monday morning. I had to face another week of endless weeks, on my feet in heels serving beer and wiggling for good tips. Thank god—or the gods—I had Johnny to come home to each evening. I got dressed after I took care of Johnny. It was finally beginning to feel normal to dress in bras and panties and slide the pantyhose up my legs. Sitting with my legs demurely crossed while in a short skirt was practically second

nature to me now. It was almost natural to check the low-cut white knit blouse I wore to make sure the bra wasn't showing. I even got my makeup done early instead of waiting until it was almost time to go to work.

So here I was, Sylvia Conners, waitress and mother—and of course, woman. I would survive. No, we would survive—Johnny and me. To hell with the Judge, Marty, Officer Mercer and all their cohorts. Only Callie—if she was one of them—had been decent to me.

As I sat there, thinking as I drank my coffee and bracing myself to go to work, there was a knock at my door. Callie? No, it was still early. She wasn't due for another half hour. I opened the door. A shade postman was waiting patiently for me, looking very official in his summer uniform. "I have a registered letter for you, Ms. Conners," he said formally, his eyes happily looking down the front of my blouse. "Just sign here," he said, handing me a pen and a form.

Who could be sending me a registered letter? I wondered. Back in my days of making movies, they were as common as junk mail. Who did Sylvia Conners know who would be sending her a registered letter? As the postman left, I quickly tore it open, nearly breaking a nail in the process. To my amazement, it was from one of the large publishing houses in New York. With trembling hands, I read:

Dear Ms. Conners:

This letter is to convey to you the agreed-upon advance for all US rights to your manuscript, Sammy the Smart Little Squirrel. While your agent, Ms. Musgrave, has indicated that this manuscript is the first of a proposed series of children's books, this advance is for this manuscript only. We, of course, are most interested in optioning the rights of all future books in this series.

I read on. The letter talked about publishing dates and a proposed book tour. I was too stunned for the details to soak in. I felt much as I had the day of my transformation. My life was being turned upside down again—albeit for the better this time.

But how? The manuscript had just been mailed out the night before.

Obviously, the publisher had had it for weeks—time enough to negotiate with my agent, a Ms. Musgrave, whoever she was. Wait. Callie had told Officer Mercer to deliver the manuscript as soon as possible. How soon was soon when you were the messenger of the gods? Maybe delivering it several weeks before I wrote it was child's play for Mercury. Callie would have the answers. I jumped up and ran out the door, heading for Callie's trailer.

Somehow, I wasn't too surprised when I found a vacant lot where Callie's trailer had been. There was no evidence that it had ever been there.

"Something wrong, Sly?"

I turned and saw a woman, not much older than I, dressed in a blue and white Texas Cowboys T-shirt and denim shorts. She was blonde, not at all unattractive, and held a little girl not much older than Johnny in her arms. Both she and the little girl were shades. I knew who she was. Her name was Rita Michaels, and she lived with her husband and daughter a couple of trailers away. Callie had pointed her out to me, but we had never met. Or at least, in my memories we had never met.

"No... no... Rita, nothing at all," I managed with a smile.

She shrugged. "Well, I know I'm a few minutes early, but I thought I'd pick up Johnny now. I wanted to give Trina here her bath."

So there was no Callie now, I realized quickly. Instead, Rita was my babysitter while I worked. Well, she appeared to be a good mother. The little girl hugged her dearly and was smiling. She wasn't Callie, but then again, who was?

For that matter, I wondered after she had left with Johnny, exactly who was Callie? The mythology book offered a clue or two. Besides, I was getting used to the way the gods operated. Callie had to be Calliope, one of the muses. She was listed as the muse of lyric poetry, but the book also said that some sources didn't assign particular areas of expertise to a muse. I suppose there was no muse of things like TV sitcoms or children's books. Who knows? Maybe she was my muse

when I wrote all those sleazy movie plots. No, probably not. I don't think so, I said to myself. There probably wasn't a muse for sleazy movie plots. Maybe Marty handled those.

My thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of my phone. "Hello?"

"Please hold, Ms. Connors. Ms. Musgrave will be right with you," a secretarial voice said pleasantly.

Musgrave? Oh, of course, I remembered. She was apparently my agent. I only had to listen to elevator music for a few seconds before a somehow familiar voice said, "Sly? Sorry about that. I was just talking with your publisher."

"Callie?" I ventured. Musgrave—muse. Of course.

"The same," she laughed. "Of course I'm now white, blonde, and a couple of years younger, but it's still Callie."

"You're my agent?"

"Who better, honey? What did you think of the check?"

"What check?"

"In the envelope, silly."

"I never got past the letter," I said breathlessly, shaking the envelope to be rewarded with a slip of blue paper. I looked at it. It was a check made out in my name for twenty thousand dollars. There was a time in my life when twenty thousand had been chickenfeed, but now it was an unimaginable fortune. I touched the check reverently, as if I was afraid it was not real.

"Of course, that's just an advance," she told me. "I admit, I forged your name on the contracts, but I didn't think you'd mind. After all, it took your new publisher about six weeks to put it together right, so I can assure you it's a very good deal."

I was sure it was. I had a gut feeling muses made very good literary agents.

"I can't wait for the book tour to start," she gushed. "You'll have to

bring Johnny along, too. I'll watch him for you, and you won't even have to pay childcare. It'll be part of my percentage."

I had to giggle. "Oh, Callie, I miss you already."

"Just keep writing those wonderful books and you'll see me lots," she laughed. "Oops, got to go now. I've got a movie deal cooking on line two."

We said our goodbyes. Then, I rushed to get my purse. I wanted to get that check in my account before it disappeared as magically as my worries about my new life had.

The trip to the bank made me a few minutes late to work. The teller had been a little hesitant. It wasn't too often that a waitress from Randy Andy's swivelled into the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank of Ovid to make a twenty thousand dollar deposit. Fortunately, Susan Jager was in the lobby, too, doing her banking, so the teller relaxed with Susan's help and made the deposit with no fuss.

"A book deal!" Susan said with a smile. "I didn't realize you were so talented."

"Neither did I," I laughed as I hurried off to work.

Marty was looking at his watch as I rushed in. "You're half an hour late," he growled. "I'm going to have to dock your pay."

"Marty, I'm only fifteen minutes late," I corrected him.

"Well," he allowed, "that may be true, but Shelly just got here, too."

"I had a doctor's appointment," Shelly called out from behind the bar. "I couldn't help it."

"What's wrong, Shelly?" I asked. It hadn't occurred to me that a shade could need a doctor.

"Oh, it's just my feet again," she sighed. "It's these stupid heels."

Yes, it was stupid to expect us to work all day in heels. Much more of it and I'd be in the doctor's office, too. Wait a minute, I thought. I had twenty thousand in the bank, and there was a lot more where that

came from. But what was it they always tell writers when they sign their first book deal. Oh, yeah. Don't give up the day job. I still needed this job, but I had a little leverage now with twenty big ones in the bank.

"Listen, Marty," I said sternly, "I think this heels bit is just a little silly. I mean, this is a bar—not a strip joint."

"But the customers expect it," Marty protested.

I looked over at the only four customers who had come in to drink an early lunch. "Marty, those guys would still be in here if Shelly and I didn't shave our legs for six months. Come on, be a sport. We'll wear the short skirts and low-cut tops. Just let us wear flats."

"Well, I don't know," he said slowly. He sensed a little rebellion. He wasn't sure why, but he realized I might just tell him to take the job and shove it. Shelly was remaining quiet, though. The poor kid needed the job. I knew how she felt. I had felt the same way until this morning.

"Well, that's okay," I said lightly. "I really didn't want to work this many hours anyway. I'll just quit."

"You'll what?" Marty practically yelled. "You can't! You need this job."

"Not anymore," I smiled, waving my deposit slip. "I wrote a book. It's going to be published."

"Oh, Sly!" Shelly gushed, practically crushing my breasts with a hug. "That's great!" Then sadly, she added, "But I'll miss you around here."

The funny thing was I didn't want to quit. Oh sure, I wanted to spend more time with Johnny, and I sure didn't want to spend so many hours in heels, but I liked Shelly and the rest of Marty's crew. I was also going to miss some of the customers. Some of the guys were pretty decent, and if you gave them a big cheery smile, they tipped pretty well. Oh what the heck, I was even starting to like Marty—in a way.

"Uh, Sly," Marty began, "let's not be hasty. Maybe we can work something out."

In the few minutes that followed, I began to understand just how hard it was for Marty to get employees. With Vulman expanding, there were plenty of jobs that either paid better or didn't require a girl to be a sexy tease to make a buck. In the end, we worked something out. Shelly and I convinced him that one waitress wearing flats could move a lot quicker than two swaying in heels. As a result, he could get by with one waitress at lunch when it wasn't very busy. The same was true of Monday and Tuesday evenings, which were slow. Marty finally agreed. His desire to both save money and not lose a waitress overcame his desire (and make no mistake about it—it was his desire) to see us in heels.

Shelly still needed the money, so she took the bulk of the hours. I would come in Friday for lunch and work evenings Wednesday through Saturday. Of course, I didn't tell him about the book tour. Maybe by then, the Judge would create another waitress for Marty. I was certain he would be lobbying for one if business continued to pick up.

"So are you going to work today?" Marty wanted to know.

"It would just be an extra expense for you," I reminded him. "Do you really need me?"

He thought about it for a moment. "I suppose not."

"Great!" I called with a departing grin. "In that case, I think I'll go see a guy named Johnny!"

"Well," I said, coming out of my trance, "for once one of the Judge's victims didn't find the man of her dreams."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Susan commented. "Johnny is a quite a little charmer."

"Who was Johnny?" I asked Diana.

She shrugged. "Beats me. The ones who don't remember don't interest me that much."

I looked over at Jerry, who was walking back over to me, kids in tow. "Well, there's one who doesn't remember who is of great interest to me," I told her.

"Tell me, Diana," Susan asked quickly before Jerry and the kids could get in earshot, "who are these challengers? Are they the old Titans?"

"We're not completely sure," Diana replied. "What Marty told Sly was pretty much the story. Of course, what he didn't know was that we wanted Lycus to get away."

"What?" Susan and I chorused.

"Sure, but that's another story," Diana laughed. "Right now, I need a little fun." Over her shoulder, she called, "I hear there's a cute young college professor playing volleyball with the coeds. I think I'll join them."

Recognition crossed Susan's face as she gasped, "Hey, wait a minute, Diana. That's my husband you're talking about!"

Diana laughed as she ran down the beach, a laughing Susan close behind.

Ovid VIII: The Team

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Part 1

I could remember being frightened before, and I could remember being elated. I was frightened back in high school when in a football game, I was being covered on a pass pattern by a guy who seemed to be twice my size. I thought he would kill me before I could haul in the ball that would win the game for us. Then I remembered the fear wash away as I caught the ball just inside the goal line. Then, I was elated. But that was another lifetime ago. Now, here I was an attractive young blonde woman named Cindy Patton, destined to live out her life as a wife, mother, and assistant to the all- powerful Judge in Ovid, Oklahoma. And for the first time in my memory of either life, I was both frightened and elated at the same time.

I was also hot and tired as I walked up the stairs to the offices over the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank of Ovid. It was a hot July day in Ovid. The fireworks of the Fourth were over, and the hottest days of the summer were upon us. I suspected the gods mitigated the temperatures a little for this town of theirs, but even though we were usually a few degrees cooler in the summer than nearby Tulsa, it was still hot and sticky as I walked up the stairs. Dressing in pantyhose made it even hotter. Still, I supposed, if I were still male, I'd have to wear a tie. Somehow, that seemed even worse. I still hadn't cooled off from the ride in the Taurus. I had been out to Duggan's IGA to see Jerry my husband before going downtown, and the short ride hadn't given the car's air conditioner enough time to cool the vehicle down. I would have killed in that moment for an elevator, but there was none.

So it was with a silent prayer of thanks that I opened the door to Susan's office and breathed in the air- conditioned air of her law office. Dori sat at the reception desk, to the casual observer the model of an

efficient, middle-aged secretary, but to those of us who were aware of the forces behind Ovid, a shade, almost but not quite transparent.

“Cindy!” she said brightly, looking up from her computer. “We haven’t seen you over here in quite a while.”

“I’ve been busy, Dori, but it’s too hot to work today,” I quipped. Actually, I hadn’t been all that busy. Usually, I was in Susan’s office a couple of times a week, since Susan often had to defend people coming before the Judge. While she often was called upon by the court to defend a person destined to become a new resident of Ovid, she had begun to develop a substantial local practice as well. This required us to meet often, which we enjoyed, as we had become best friends since our own transformations.

Lately though, things had been slow in the courts of Ovid. The only cases had been in the hands of a more junior municipal judge and had been mundane in nature—the sort of cases which came before the courts in every small town in America—things like property disputes and other civil matters.

There had been no transformations in nearly a month, as the Judge had been out of town. Those of us on the inside understood why. June Webster, an attractive woman of indeterminate age, had been staying at the Ovid Inn. She was supposedly with the GAO—the Government Accounting Office—on a mission to look into the accounting procedures at Vulman Industries, which currently had a large government contract. Although no one had told us for certain, Susan and I were convinced that June Webster was in fact Juno, the Judge’s wife. If I remembered my mythology, Jupiter and Juno had a rather stormy relationship. It seemed the myths were right.

The door to Susan’s office opened suddenly, and I saw Susan with her arm around her husband, Steven. Both were smiling, so I wondered what they were doing in her office with the door closed. I don’t think there was a couple in Ovid more deeply in love than Susan and Steven. Who would have believed that they had both been born the opposite sex, married in their old lives only later to divorce, and ended up falling in love all over again under the spell of Ovid?

“See you tonight, sweetheart,” Susan practically cooed, giving Steven a chaste but meaningful kiss. He actually blushed a little, said, “Hi, Cindy,” and left quickly.

“A little afternoon delight?” I smiled at Susan.

She smiled back. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” she grinned as she shut the door behind us.

Well, yes, I would, I thought. It sounded like fun. It was a shame Jerry’s office over at the supermarket was so exposed or I might try it myself. Maybe I’d visit him at closing some night...

“To what do I owe the honor of your visit?” Susan asked brightly as we stepped into her office. “I thought with the Judge out of town, you’d be playing hooky.”

“I already am,” I admitted. It was an hour before I was due off work. I’d still be going back, but just long enough to close my office for the night before picking up the twins at day-care.

Susan looked at her watch. “I suppose you are. Well, I can’t even offer you a Diet Coke. I ran out and was just on my way to pick some more up.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, trying not to sound disappointed. In the heat of an Ovid summer afternoon, a Diet Coke sounded like ambrosia. “I’ll just settle for a glass of water.”

“No need for water,” a voice called happily as the air in the room suddenly popped. There was Diana, a very busty blonde this time in a short red dress that was so tight on her it looked as if it might explode. In each hand, she carried a bottle of chilled champagne that bore the label of an expensive brand. “All we need are glasses.”

Susan wrinkled her nose a little. She never drank alcohol. “You don’t have a bottle of Diet Coke tucked in that dress anywhere, do you?”

Diana looked confused. “Where?” she asked, batting her eyelashes in mock surprise while she indicated with her hands that there was absolutely no room in the dress for anything else. Then, with a smaller pop than the one that had transported her into the office, one of the

champagne bottles became a liter of Diet Coke. “Party pooper,” she muttered.

“I thought maybe you were out of town too,” I told her as she opened the two bottles with a snap of her finger. “I haven’t seen you since that day at the beach.”

“I am out of town,” she told me. She tried to pour a glass of champagne for me, but I shook my head. “You’re going to make me drink alone?” she asked.

“I’ll take a glass of the Diet Coke,” I told her. She shrugged and poured glasses of Diet Coke for Susan and me and a glass of champagne for herself. When we had all settled into Susan’s comfortable leather chairs, Diana continued.

“As I said, I am out of town. Or at least I have been. July isn’t exactly my favorite month in Oklahoma. Even the men wilt in this heat, and a hard man is good to find.”

“I thought myths said you were a virgin,” Susan laughed over her Diet Coke.

Diana frowned. “You try being a virgin for a couple of thousand years. Who wrote those stupid myths anyway?”

“Well, the Judge has been out of town, too,” I commented, quickly changing the subject.

Diana laughed a broad laugh. “I’m not surprised. I heard that Juno was back in town. He’ll stay out of town until the little woman leaves.”

Susan looked confused, so I took a moment to tell her about June Webster. “So the Judge is married?” Susan asked. She had never been the fan of mythology I was.

“So to speak,” Diana told her. “It’s what you might call a common law marriage, but they’ve been married for as long as any of us can remember—and that’s a long, long time.”

“But they don’t get along very well,” I explained to Susan. “The Judge apparently cheated on her quite a few times.”

“The Judge?” Susan said, incredulous. I had to admit, it was hard to picture the Judge, stern disciplinarian that he always appeared to be, as a philanderer. I had found in my experience of working with the gods that they weren’t always exactly as the myths portrayed them, but there was invariably a grain of truth in each of the myths. While I doubted that the Judge had fathered quite as many bastards as the myths related, he had probably sowed a few wild oats in his youth—if the time of the Roman Empire could be said to be his youth. Juno—or Hera as the Greeks called her—was a powerful goddess in her own right—and a jealous one.

“Oh, you don’t really know our Judge,” Diana laughed. “In any case, it appears their trial separation may be about to end. I suspect she’s come back either to reconcile or dissolve the marriage.”

“The gods have divorce?” I asked, suddenly curious.

Diana shook her head. “Not exactly. We dissolve marriages rather than divorcing. Maybe someday Eric Vulman will tell you how he dissolved the marriage with Vera March sometime.”

Now Susan’s mouth was wide open. “Eric Vulman was married to Vera March? When?”

“A long time ago,” I told her with a friendly pat on her hand. “Susan, you really need to read more mythology.”

“I guess I do,” she agreed, nodding.

Our conversation was suddenly interrupted as three very attractive teenage girls burst into our office. One was Dori’s daughter, Myra. Susan had hired her for the summer since the girl had an interest in becoming a lawyer someday. She was dressed very professionally, a khaki shirtdress doing little to disguise her terrific figure, punctuated by two magnificent breasts. Her blonde hair was tied back in a demure ponytail, but it was easy to visualize what it looked like when it was allowed to flow loose over her shoulders. She wore a pair of conservative brown heels, only an inch high, and her legs were encased in tan nylon. For all her attempts to look conservative, she was a stunner.

The second girl was dressed much more informally. She had long, luxurious auburn hair and was wearing shorts which showed off her magnificent legs and a sleeveless white blouse. Although not as well endowed as her friend Myra, Samantha Wallace was a very, very attractive girl. Bright and vivacious, she was a born leader and one of the most popular girls in town. Sam had also been of great help to many of the women of Ovid who had been born as men and remembered their male pasts. Her acceptance of her growing womanhood had been an inspiration to many of us.

I didn't know the third girl all that well. Like Samantha, she had been transformed before I came to Ovid. Her name was Jennifer Tilton, the daughter of the President of the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank. When I had first come to Ovid, she had been a little tomboy. A couple of years younger than Samantha, she had seemed to fight being a girl with every ounce of her energy. She had come around, though, the last few months, under the influence of her mother, also a transformee. Now, she appeared to be a blonde version of Samantha, her knit top proudly displaying her budding breasts while her own shorts showed a pair of legs that were already driving all the boys in her class wild.

"I dropped those papers off at the County Clerk's office like you asked," Myra said, proudly displaying the receipt.

"And?" Susan asked, amused.

Myra grinned. "And the defendant missed the three o'clock deadline. Becky Marshall from my class at school is working there over the summer, and she told me ours was the only one filed."

"Good work," Susan said with a smile. "You'll make a lawyer yet."

Myra beamed. Then, she asked, "Do you suppose it would be all right if I left a little early this afternoon? We'd like to do a little shopping and..."

"Meet your boyfriends before the party at the country club?" Susan finished for her.

“Well... yes,” Myra said. “But how did you know about the party? I thought it was just for teens.”

“Oh, you have your sources and I have mine,” Susan drawled. I was sure Dori had told her all about the dance. “Sure, go on. You girls have fun. And be careful.”

“We will!” they all chorused as they rushed out the door, closing it with a loud slam.

I shook my head, taking another sip of Diet Coke. “Who would believe that not so long ago they were all male?” I mused absently.

Susan sighed. “I suppose we could say the same about ourselves.”

“It’s the magic of Ovid,” Diana explained. “Ovid gives you what you need to be who you’ve become. Would either of you go back to your old lives if I gave you the chance?”

“No!” Susan and I both said together. The very thought of giving up my life in Ovid, my family, my job, my friends, sent chills up and down my spine.

Diana’s eyes narrowed. “Would you like to see what it was like here back at the start?”

“The start?” I asked.

Diana shrugged. “Well, not exactly the start, but close to it. I’m talking about the time Samantha and Jennifer came here. Since we don’t have any new stories, an old one will have to do.”

“But I don’t have that information,” I protested. “I can only show the lives of the people whose trials I have attended. Samantha and Jennifer were here almost a year before I was.”

Diana tapped the side of her head. “It’s all in here, girls. All the cases before you came to town Cindy are locked in here. Now, since you don’t have any good stories for me, what say I give you one?”

“Sure,” I said happily as Susan nodded in agreement.

“Okay, ladies,” Diana said, hunching over the desk with Susan and

me, “here we go...”

“What was that?”

The nervous question sounded out of place, coming from the deep rumble that served as a voice for Dusty Stephenson. I barely heard it over the hoots and laughs chorusing from dozens of throats as the Northwest Missouri State Bearcats celebrated their good fortune.

We were on a jet—a rare experience for our team. Usually, we travelled short distances to play nearby colleges in towns as small as our own Maryville, Missouri. Not this time, though. While we might have expected to be bussed to Muskogee, Oklahoma for Saturday’s important game, a wealthy alumnus, overjoyed with the season that had left our football team with eight wins and no losses so far, had culled a plane from his fleet of charters and made it available to the team. Yes, we were travelling in style all right. We felt as if we were going to swoop down from the sky and frighten the Muskogee State players to death. After all, we were travelling like the big teams that day.

“It was just an air pocket,” I leaned across the aisle and told Dusty. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

Worry crossed his Neanderthal brow anyhow. “Are you sure?” Dusty had never flown before. He had grown up and lived his whole life before college on a farm in Southern Iowa, not even a hundred miles from Maryville. In fact, until he had come to college, he had never even been out of Iowa. Everybody liked Dusty. He was one of those big, slow farm boys who, if he liked you, was your friend for life. And Dusty liked just about everybody—everybody except Wild Bill.

“You’re gonna have to get off, Dusty,” Bill ‘Wild Bill’ Moreland quipped from a couple of rows forward. “We can’t gain altitude with you on board.”

Wild Bill’s friends—or maybe ‘sycophants’ was a better word—laughed at his joke. Dusty had always been a little sensitive about his size.

Coach Wallace had been on him to lose twenty pounds, but Dusty was just one of those guys who could polish off a three-pound steak and still be hungry. At least Wild Bill's jibe had made him forget about the rough air. His dislike for our overrated quarterback was sufficient to chase away all other thoughts.

Come to think of it, I felt the same way about him. Wild Bill Moreland had come out of a top high school football powerhouse over in Nebraska—in Lincoln to be exact. He had one hell of a throwing arm. He could rocket the ball on target all the way across the field and a good fifty yards downfield with pinpoint accuracy. Normally, the University of Nebraska would have been interested in him, but Wild Bill had a little problem—namely, he had trouble reading defenses. He could have studied the other team's defensive playbook for a week and he would have still thrown into coverage. I understood that at his high school, he held the record for passing yards, but he also held the record for interceptions. Nobody was going to play QB for the Huskers who couldn't read a defense. They offered him a chance to walk on, but no scholarship.

Northwest Missouri State was perfect for him, though. Coach Wallace had developed a winning program based on the full house backfield, where two halfbacks and a fullback lined up behind the quarterback, either running the ball or running short pass patterns. Our wide receivers were used primarily to keep the defense honest. Wild Bill had direct orders from the Coach to throw to them only when there wasn't a defender within twenty yards. So the result was that Wild Bill actually looked like a pretty good quarterback, instead of the mediocre one he would have been with most teams. Many of us on the team believed he would be able to look good enough to make it to the pros, but few of us thought he had what it took to last.

Wild Bill even looked like a quarterback. He was tall, slim but well muscled, square jawed, with keen blue eyes, and with a shock of blonde hair that all the girls loved to run their fingers through. But when he opened his mouth, it was usually to say something stupid or cutting or both. In short, he was a jerk.

“Can’t a guy get any sleep around here?” a voice grumbled in the window seat next to me. It was Larry Gunn, one of our starting defensive ends—I was the other. Larry could read an opposing pass pattern better than their own quarterback—and certainly better than our quarterback. He was quick, intelligent, and would probably have been playing for one of the top football powers if he had been taller, but at five- eleven, no matter how quick and smart he was, wide receivers could catch the passes over his head.

If you could put the two of us together, you would have had one hell of a defensive end. I was reasonably intelligent—or at least my grade point said I was—and I was six-three. Unfortunately, I wasn’t terribly fast. I had to depend upon my size and my ability to figure out where the ball was going to succeed. If the receiver managed to get a step on me, I was toast.

Larry and I had been friends since our freshman year. By sheer chance, we had ended up as roommates, then we pledged the same fraternity. We were both good students—probably the best on the team—and we both had the same taste in girls—bright and well built with long brown hair. In fact, that had been our only bone of contention during our junior year when we both went after the same girl. We both lost out to Dennis Mahoney, our starting halfback. It was no big deal, though. Larry and I were both pretty decent-looking guys, so there were plenty more girls where that one came from. Besides, Dennis was a pretty decent guy.

“Okay, listen up!” Coach Wallace suddenly yelled as soon as the seat belt sign went off. He was on his feet, his Bearcats ball cap pushed back on his forehead to reveal a thinning hairline. He was in good shape for sixty, but it hadn’t saved his hair. “This is a short flight. We’ll land in Muskogee in about thirty minutes, so keep all your gear together.”

It isn’t as if we had much gear. All the uniforms and equipment had been shipped by bus along with some of the assistant coaches and support people. The only support person on the plane was Jill Wentworth, the Team Manager. By all rights, Jill should have been on

the bus with the equipment, but she had begged Coach Wallace to let her ride with the team. Jill wasn't the kind of girl who wanted to be surrounded by big beefy guys all the time, and she wasn't the kind of girl who was dyke. No, she just loved the game of football. Raised by a widowed father back in Wisconsin, she had grown up playing football with her two brothers. They attended all the Wisconsin Badger games from the time she was old enough to walk. Actually, she could even throw the football pretty good—for a girl.

Jill wasn't bad looking either. She had short blonde hair curled in sort of a Meg Ryan style. Come to think of it, she looked a little like Meg Ryan. Only a little, though.

"Hey Wentworth!" Wild Bill called out to her as she stood in the aisle, a football in hand as she talked to Horace White, the big black starting wide receiver. "What say you come back here and check out my equipment before we get to Muskogee?"

That got a few laughs from Wild Bill's usual followers, but the rest of us just looked away so as not to embarrass Jill. We needn't have bothered. Jill didn't reply, or even look embarrassed. She didn't even seem to be looking at Wild Bill, but she knew exactly where the prick was. In one fluid motion, she rifled the ball in her hand—not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough to sting—right at the top of Wild Bill's head. The ball thudded off his forehead with an audible smack.

"Ow!" Wild Bill screamed to the sudden roar of laughter from most of the players who had seen it all. "That hurt!"

"No it didn't," Jill called smugly in a feminine but confident tone. "If I wanted to hurt you, I would have thrown harder."

That got another laugh before Coach Wallace jumped to his feet. "All right Moreland, Wentworth. Knock it off before somebody gets hurt."

"She already hurt me!" Wild Bill protested.

"Then maybe I should put you down as injured for tomorrow's game?" the coach asked.

"No," Wild Bill said petulantly. "I'm fine." Of course, he knew that there

were two other quarterbacks just waiting in the wings to see what they could do if Wild Bill weren't in the game, and they weren't too bad themselves. The crown always weighs heavy.

Larry was wide awake now. He snorted at Wild Bill's little act and said to me, "Jace, when is that clown going to grow up?"

I'm not sure, but I think Wild Bill heard him, for he winced suddenly. Larry could get away with putting Wild Bill down. Like me, he was defense, so we didn't have to take orders from our overrated field general. Also, either one of us was strong enough to dismantle Wild Bill while eating breakfast. You don't get to be a defensive end without a fair amount of muscle. Of course, we still kept remarks like that mostly to ourselves. It was bad for team morale, and we were a team bound for glory.

Northwest Missouri State had been a growing football power for the last few years. Coach Wallace, now in his tenth season, had built us into a winning team. Many thought this would be the year we took it all—the NCAA Division II Title, making us the top team in the nation in our division. Oh, it didn't get you a spot on nationwide TV on New Year's Day, but it was as high as a school like ours could go, and for the players like Wild Bill and Dennis Mahoney who were potential pro players, it was a chance to get at least a little media time. That might mean a lot of money when the NFL draft came around in the spring.

I didn't really want to see Wild Bill go too high in the draft. He didn't deserve it. It was the team around him that made him look good. I could only hope that the pro scouts would realize it. Dennis Mahoney, on the other hand, I wished well. I looked back at Dennis, sitting calmly next to his best friend and old high school classmate, Darren McDougal. They were unlikely friends, and although their paths while similar in some ways were very different in others. For similarities, they were both from the little Missouri town of Cameron, not too far from Maryville, and neither of them was particularly worldly. Both planned to be teachers, although Darren liked math and Dennis was aiming more toward social studies. But their paths were starting to diverge. Dennis had a steady girl—the aforementioned brunette—

whereas Darren preferred to shop around. And Dennis had definite NFL potential and would probably play several years before settling down to teach—if he ever did. Darren, although the typical big Midwestern farm boy who ends up playing tackle or guard was way too slow to make it in the pros. It didn't really matter to him, since all he really wanted to do was go back to Cameron and teach math.

All in all, we were a great team. I was proud to be a part of it. Here I was, Jason Stromberg, a big kid from the suburbs of Kansas City, playing for a team which could go all the way to an undefeated season. If we did well enough, maybe I would even get a shot in the draft. Or I might decide to walk on at the Chief's camp if I wasn't drafted. No, I realized with a smile. I wasn't destined to play pro football. I had never even wanted to be a pro. I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do with my life. I started out with ambitions to become a doctor like my father, but although my grades were very good, they weren't the sort of grades that would get me into medical school. So I gave up on that major. I was now a history major, but I didn't particularly want to teach. That meant I would probably gravitate to something where a degree was a degree was a degree. Something like selling, I thought. Many large companies liked big former football players who were personable and reasonably intelligent as sales people. They tended to be reasonably aggressive, friendly, and good team players. Well, it wasn't the life I would have picked for myself, but it wouldn't be a bad one. I'd probably end up in Kansas City or some similar city just like my parents had done and marry the first girl I asked and raise two point three children in my tract house. I'd drive a company car until I reached middle management. Then, I'd opt for a BMW as part of my midlife crisis. I'd find a girlfriend on the side and watch my wife grow old while we held together our marriage for the sake of the children.

And why not? Wasn't that what my family had done? My older sister, Joan, had left for college two years before me. At that time, I could already see my parent's marriage beginning to unravel. It got even worse after I left for school. My younger brother, Johnny, was a senior in high school, so by the time he started college, I figured my parents

would be splitsville. Maybe not, though. Maybe they'd just stay together and hate each other.

My musings were interrupted by a loud pop coming from the rear of the plane, followed by what sounded like tearing metal. The entire fuselage shuddered suddenly, causing a collective gasp from the entire team. Whatever had just happened wasn't supposed to happen. We all realized that.

Suddenly, a tense woman's voice filled the cabin. It was our pilot. "I know you all felt that," she said, trying to sound upbeat—and failing. "That was our starboard engine. It just flamed out, but don't worry. This is a BAC-111, and it's designed to operate on one engine if need be."

Maybe so, I thought, but that didn't mean we should sit back and enjoy the ride. The plane was obviously much harder to fly with one engine gone, which meant it was going to be much harder to land also. And the sound of tearing metal was more than just a flame out.

"We'll be setting down shortly. We're about fifteen minutes out of Muskogee right now and..."

Whatever she was going to say would be forever lost, for the plane began to roll lazily to the left with another shudder. All we heard from the cockpit was a muttered "damn!" as the speaker went silent.

If we were worried before, we were petrified now. Several members of the team were yelling "What the fuck?" and "Oh Jesus!" and anything else they could think of to yell as the plane began to drop. Something had gone terribly—fatally—wrong. I thought about my family. I thought about how they would handle my death. Maybe it would bring them closer together. Maybe some good could come out of...

Then, all at once, the shuddering stopped. We were still dropping, but it was the typical drop you always feel when a plane is making a normal descent. We all became suddenly quiet, except for Dusty next to me who uttered, "Thank you, God."

"What's happening?" I asked Larry who had his face pressed to the

window.

“We’re landing,” he said softly.

“I thought the pilot said we were still fifteen minutes from Muskogee,” I pointed out.

“I thought she did, too,” Larry replied. Then he pointed out the window. “But look.”

Part 2

Leaning over him, I looked out the window. It was a clear fall day, and it looked as if I could see forever. What was laid out below me was a long valley with fairly impressive hills on either side. There was something odd about the hills, though, I thought. It was almost as if they were identical on each side of the valley, as if the valley were somehow squeezed into a nonexistent space. Of more immediate interest, though, was the landing field that we were banking to approach. Before we turned too far for me to see, I had seen a long concrete runway in our path.

I marvelled at how our pilot had regained control of the plane. I had actually thought we were goners, about to have ourselves splattered all over the Oklahoma landscape. Maybe this was a good omen, I speculated. Maybe this meant we’d beat Muskogee State, for now nothing could stop us.

Funny, though, I mused. The town in the distance didn’t look big enough to be Muskogee. Maybe it wasn’t. Perhaps the pilot had opted for a nearby field instead of flying on to Muskogee. Yes, I thought. That must be it. Well, I didn’t much care where we landed as long as I got off this plane in one piece.

The ground rushed up to meet us, and it felt as if we were floating down the runway rather than flying. It was honest to God the smoothest landing I had ever seen. We never even felt the wheels touch the ground, and the roar of the engines reversing was like sweet music to us all.

The plane taxied up to a small collection of hangars that housed

several private planes. But there was no sign of any airline activity; nor was there a sign displaying where we had landed.

“Where the fuck are we?” somebody muttered.

“I don’t know, man,” someone else drawled in an accent that would be right at home in this place. “I grew up down here and I don’t know where we are.”

Well, we couldn’t be far from Muskogee, I thought. A plane on its descent travels at—what?—two hundred miles per hour? Fifteen minutes meant fifty miles, give or take a mile or two. That meant we were about an hour away by bus. I wondered if they had radioed ahead so that a bus could be waiting.

“Okay,” Coach Wallace called out, bracing himself on the back of a seat as we taxied in. “We’ve had our excitement for the day.”

There was nervous laughter at that remark. The coach even smiled himself before going on, “We should still be able to get into Muskogee at a reasonable time, so I expect we’ll still have some time to practice today. Go ahead and gather everything up. The sooner we get out of this plane, the sooner we can be on our way.”

“And welcome to the Sooner State,” Wild Bill called out with a laugh.

The coach frowned for a minute before realizing what had just happened. Then even he broke out into a grin. “Yeah, right. Now let’s get out of here.”

The plane rolled to a stop, and our single flight attendant opened the forward door. I wondered how we were going to get down from the plane. Obviously, this airport was too small to have modern jetways. I watched, though, as two men wheeled a large metal stairway into place, but I wasn’t really watching the stairway as much as I was watching the men. To a casual observer, they would probably have appeared normal, but I was studying them intently. Both men were... not exactly transparent, but they didn’t appear completely solid either. It just seemed to be how intently I looked at them that made the difference.

“Jace,” Larry said nervously, “do you see what I see?”

I was hesitant to admit what I saw. “What do you mean, Larry?”

“Those men,” Larry said, emphasizing whom he meant with a nod of his head. “Do they seem odd to you?”

I had to say it some time. “Do you mean, almost transparent?”

“Yeah,” he replied, relieved that he wasn’t the only one who noticed.

“Do you suppose they’re ghosts? Did we really crash? Is this like—you know—Heaven’s airport or something?”

That seemed to be a ridiculous statement on the surface of it, but things hadn’t seemed quite right ever since the explosion in the engine. Reality seemed to be suddenly tilted, as if... No, we couldn’t be dead, I thought. I reached over to pinch my own arm. Ouch! If I was dead, why had that hurt? Besides, I didn’t feel dead. I felt as young and healthy as ever.

A man suddenly appeared in the doorway of the plane. He was tall and slender, a serious look on what we could see of his face—his eyes were hidden by reflective sunglasses. He was some sort of official, his gray-blue shirt, dark trousers, and boots indicated that. Then, I noticed the badge. Police, perhaps, I thought, or State Patrol.

“Listen up, please,” he ordered in an authoritative voice. He didn’t have to speak too loudly. All of us had been silent since the plane had landed, as if we all noticed something out of order. “You have just landed at the Ovid Municipal Airport in Ovid, Oklahoma. Your plane has been damaged, and there may be some danger of a fuel leak and fire, so I am going to ask you to deplane immediately. Do not worry about your personal belongings. Those will be taken care of once the plane has been checked. As I step by your rows, please exit at once and go directly to the bus outside.”

“What bus?” I whispered to Larry. Then, together we looked out the cabin window at a large silver bus which I could have sworn had not been there a moment before. There were no markings on the bus. In fact, there were no seams on the bus. It was as if it was made out of a

single piece of silver metal, gleaming brightly in the Oklahoma sun.

“Hey man, this is getting weird,” Larry murmured.

He was right, but as I looked around the bus, no one else seemed unduly upset. No wait, that wasn't quite true. Of course, I couldn't see everyone on the plane, but I could see Wild Bill. He was unusually subdued, as if he, too, noticed something not quite right.

I began to watch as each row emptied, studying the faces of my teammates if I could to see some evidence of alarm or confusion. Most seemed normal, I observed, if just a little shaken from their brush with disaster. But occasionally, I caught a glimpse of uncertainty similar to the one that must have been on my own face.

Coach Jessup, our defensive coordinator, was among that small group. As he rose to his full six foot four height, he looked back at those of us still seated. He was really second only to Coach Wallace in authority. Given his height and build—he had once played safety for the Rams—he was an impressive figure. Just in his mid thirties, many thought he would be head coach when Coach Wallace finally retired. When his eyes caught mine, the confusion registered. He shifted his eyes a little to indicate that I needed to talk to him when I could. Jill looked around, almost in terror. Again, she saw me. I gave her a curt nod as if to say it would be all right. She gave me a small nod herself before deplaning.

In all, I noticed perhaps half a dozen of my teammates sensed that something was wrong. I could tell. These guys were practically my family. Some of them had been teammates for all four years with me. I could tell when something was bothering them, and something was bothering them now.

All of us hustled over to the bus as quickly as we could. Nobody wanted to take a chance on the plane suddenly exploding. I looked back at the tail of the plane and got quite a shock. The BAC-111 has two engines, one mounted on either side of the fuselage near the tail, sort of like a DC-9. The engine on the left side of the plane was just so many pounds of scrap metal, its cowling shredded and blackened.

That we could have survived, I knew was miraculous. The plane could have flown on one engine with relative ease. Unfortunately, whatever had caused the engine to disintegrate had thrown debris into the tail of the aircraft, leaving it twisted as well. My father had his own plane, and I had grown up in it. I knew there was no way the pilot could have controlled a plane in that condition as well as she did. By all rights, we should have lost control and plummeted to the ground.

“What now?” Larry asked, seeing my face devoid of color.

“I’ll tell you later, man,” I promised. I didn’t want to tell him then because I thought it would have sounded crazy. I didn’t realize it then, but the craziness hadn’t even started yet.

Larry and I sat together on the bus, and Coach Jessup slid into the aisle seat across from us. Jill was sitting next to him. Once all the players had boarded the bus and cleared the aisles, he asked, “Jace, I know you saw something weird. I could see it in your eyes. What was it?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly after a moment’s thought. “Nothing seems right. Did you see those people out there on the tarmac? They... it almost looked as if you could see through them.”

“What are you talking about?” a woman’s voice said from the row behind me. I turned to see it was our pilot, her white shirt, once crisp, now stained and wilted with perspiration. It was warm in the bus, but not that warm.

“Those men.” I gestured with my hand at two workers who were now moving the ramp away from the plane. Odd, I thought, since they’d want to board it later to check it out and remove our possessions.

“Look at them. Do you notice something odd about them?”

“I do,” Larry volunteered next to me.

The pilot shook her head, her short brown locks springing as she did.

“I don’t. They just look like two workers. Why? What do you see?”

“They’re... sort of transparent,” I explained.

She looked at me for a moment, then giggled. “You’re joking, right?”

This is some sort of a prank you guys pull on people?”

Jill leaned over me, her breasts practically in my face. Good old Jill. She might be cute, but she was always just one of the guys. I guess that came from being the only girl in her home. Still, I practically got hard while she did it. I mean, she might have been just one of the guys, but she was a fine looking girl, too.

She peered at the two men. “I see what you mean. What do you think...” she began, but the bus lurched ahead suddenly, causing her to fall in my lap. I was more than a little embarrassed as I realized she could feel my growing erection. She grinned at me. “Not right now,” she jibed. “Maybe later.” She got up to return to her seat, impishly moving her hand across my crotch as she got off me.

“I think you have a new girlfriend,” Larry practically whispered in my ear. I looked at Jill’s butt as she maneuvered past Coach Jessup to reach her seat. New girlfriend, eh? Well, who knows? I thought. I could do a lot worse.

“Oh my god!” our pilot exclaimed as we pulled away.

“Did you see what I meant?” I turned and asked.

“No—I’m looking at the plane,” she explained. “I shouldn’t have been able to turn on final with one engine out and the tail in that condition.”

I nodded. She had confirmed my suspicions as well.

“For that matter,” Larry chimed in, “why did there just happen to be a bus waiting for us when we landed?”

“That’s not so strange,” Jill told us. “Airports have buses to take people off the planes in emergencies. I saw one do it when I changed planes at O’Hare last summer.”

“But that was O’Hare,” our pilot pointed out. “Big airports have those, but I imagine we’re the largest plane to ever land here. Your friend had a good point. What was a big bus like this doing just waiting for us?”

“You’re not suggesting they knew we were coming, are you?” Coach

Jessup asked. It was obvious from his tone that he didn't think much of our pilot.

"I'm not suggesting anything," she said.

"Neither am I," Larry said, as if to remind Coach Jessup that he was the one who had initially mentioned the bus. "I just find it one more oddity."

We were in for a lot of oddities as it turned out. After a couple of miles on the open road, we passed a sign that said 'Welcome to Ovid' followed by a collection of the usual roadside businesses—metal warehouses with brick fronts housing a host of firms, implement and car dealers, and so on. As the road widened to four lanes, the businesses became the usual collection of fast food restaurants, convenience stores, and gas stations. The funny thing was they were all brands I had never heard of. I supposed this Ovid was too small for the usual franchises like Burger King and KFC. I hoped we didn't have to spend much time here.

Trees began to line the street, their leaves still green, but hints of yellow and red were already present, announcing a fall a little later than we experienced further north, but fall nonetheless. It was a bigger town than I had imagined—perhaps as big or bigger than Maryville. I saw a directional sign announcing the way to Capta College. So Ovid was a college town. It was beginning to remind me in some ways of Maryville.

But only in some ways. In other ways, it was as different from Maryville as Earth is from the Moon. Nearly everyone I saw walking in the warm fall weather of Ovid bore that same almost but not quite transparent look. Except for that, they all seemed normal enough. There were men in suits and work clothes as you would expect on a working day. The only children in evidence were very young—preschoolers on a school day. I saw one of them who didn't have that transparent look, and the little guy seemed to see nothing wrong with the fact that the woman who pulled him along by the hand had that same transparent look.

Finally, the bus pulled into a large parking lot in front of a large granite building with the words 'City Hall' engraved between its entry columns. It was a typical Midwest city building—a little nicer and neater than most, but still not out of character. The building was tastefully surrounded by trees and a grassy lawn which sported two flying flags: one the US flag and the other what appeared to be a state flag. 'What were we doing here?' I wondered. I looked a few rows up at our coach. 'Why wasn't he raising hell?' We needed to be in Muskogee, not stuck at City Hall in some town I had never heard of.

It was then that I noticed still another oddity. When the plane had landed, all of us were very animated. We were relieved that we had landed safely, apparently avoiding a grisly end only through the Herculean efforts of our flight crew. Some had even cheered. Now, though, that animation was gone, replaced by an almost hypnotic silence. Oh, there were a few small conversations like the one I had been involved in, but most of the team seemed tranquil almost to the point of a stupor.

I looked at Coach Jessup. "What's happening?" I asked him. "What's the matter with Coach Wallace?"

"I don't know," he admitted. He began to rise to question the head coach, but suddenly the bus doors swung open and the strange police officer got on board. "All right, please get off the bus in an orderly fashion just like before. Then wait for me on the sidewalk."

Almost like robots, my teammates began to stand and get off the bus in almost military precision. Here and there, an individual would look around in confusion. I saw Bert Hazleton, our big halfback, look around almost in fear, but he got off just like everyone else. Soon, our row was moving. I kept looking around, trying to figure out what was going on. I stole a look at the driver—or I tried to. There was no driver. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen a driver get on or off. But how could a bus be driven without a driver? Wouldn't the guys in the front of the bus notice something was wrong? What was happening to all of us?

"Please follow me," the police officer said with authority once we were all gathered on the sidewalk. Like lemmings, we followed him into the

building. We were led into a room with wide oak doors. I realized at once it was a courtroom. But what were we doing in a courtroom? It was empty except for our group. Maybe they were just gathering us here until another bus could be brought in from Muskogee State, I rationalized. After all, what possible reason would anyone have to take us into a court?

"All rise!" the police officer suddenly intoned. We were all still on our feet, so why did he say that? I wondered. "Municipal Court of and for the City of Ovid is now in session, the Honorable Judge presiding."

A man in a crisp black robe entered the room from behind the bench. He was a dignified man, striding with the confidence of a man who is in charge and knows it. He was tall, but not as tall as many on our team and appeared to be in good shape for his age, which I estimated to be low to mid fifties. His hair and beard were both neatly trimmed and brown with just a touch of gray. He stopped at his seat, looking over at the officer. "Thank you, Officer Mercer. Spectators may be seated."

Did he mean us? There were no chairs for us, as we were before the bench. No one made a motion to sit anyway, and there were no spectators in the visitor's gallery. Then if we weren't spectators, what were we?

"Officer Mercer, will you read the charges, please?"

We all stood there in an eerie silence, either too dumbfounded or too frightened to open our mouths as Officer Mercer recited formally, "In the case of the people versus the football team of Northwest Missouri State and associated parties, the defendants are charged with unsafe operation of an aircraft and landing such aircraft on the property of the City of Ovid without proper clearances."

"Very well," the Judge said with a nod. "I hereby find the defendants..."

"Wait!" I suddenly yelled. I regretted it the moment I had done so, but I knew this wasn't right. Somebody had to say something. It might as well be me. I certainly had second thoughts about it when I saw all

eyes turned toward me, the Judge's the most piercing of all.

"Yes, Mr. Stromberg?" the Judge said in a tone that made me want to run and hide. "Do you have something to say before I pass judgement?"

I looked at my teammates. Some, like Larry, Darren and Dennis were watching me with encouragement. Most were watching with the same level of interest they might have shown if I had been a bug on the wall—which is to say, none at all.

I suppose I should have wondered how he knew my name, but when a man with as much of a powerful presence as the Judge stares at you, it is hardly the time to ask questions. Something in the back of my mind told me I had better come up with the right answer or the consequences might be most unpleasant.

"Your Honor," I began meekly, "we were just on our way to play a football game."

"I know that," he said with grim amusement.

"Well, I mean, I don't think we've done anything wrong."

"Didn't you hear the charges Officer Mercer just read?"

I sighed. "Well, yes, Your Honor, I did, but it seems there were extenuating circumstances." Now there was a good word. My college education might pay off at last. "We didn't intend to land in Ovid."

The Judge snorted, "Mr. Stromberg, you should have tried the law as a profession. I must admire your courage in this matter. However, if you say another word, I will find you in contempt of this court, and the penalty for that might well be more than you would want to pay."

I believed him, and I shut up at once. I had never been so frightened in my life. There was something about this magistrate that exuded raw power of a kind I had never imagined before. Was it a premonition of what was about to happen? Maybe. There was certainly magic in the air. It was enough to calm some and confuse others, and most were calmed by it. It was as if most of my teammates had no idea where they were or what was happening to them. The rest of us—the

confused—could only stand and brace ourselves as best we could for whatever was about to happen.

The Judge turned his attention away from me and back to the rest of our team. “I find you guilty of all charges and specifications. In accordance with the Ovid City Code...” His voice suddenly became a little deeper, uttering words I had never heard before.

At first, I thought there was something wrong. Maybe he was having a stroke or something. But no, whatever he was saying was powerful, for the level of magic in the room suddenly increased like a light breeze becoming a strong March wind. I felt it on my face, like tendrils of wind moving the air along my cheeks. Then, it was in my hair, blowing my hair, making it feel longer than it really was.

I looked around at my teammates. Some, like me, seemed to be bracing against the wind. Horace White stood there defiantly as he had many times in our backfield, but he was becoming pale, almost as if the ebony color of his skin was being blown away, revealing skin which became a light flesh pink. His shaved head was sprouting hair, but instead of its natural black, it was a light blonde shade, becoming longer and longer as his facial features changed from their natural broad masculine aspect to a more feminine appearance. His broad shoulders were narrowing swiftly, and what were those two mounds of flesh rising from his chest?

The changes were coming more quickly, and there were so many of them that I couldn't follow them all and still pay attention to what was starting to happen to my own body. A few of my teammates stayed the size they were, and one or two became even larger. Most, however, were becoming smaller—some much smaller. I watched with alarm as Jill Wentworth became suddenly taller, more muscular, as her hair seemed to pull back into her scalp. To my left, Larry seemed as tall as I was, but his nearly black hair had become a wavy brown. He looked younger, too, almost like a young version of Brad Pitt.

“What's happening?” I asked him, surprised to hear my own voice over the gasps and cries emanating from the team. My voice seemed higher and more melodic.

Larry looked at me in stunned silence.

I frowned. "What is it?" I asked.

Ignoring for a moment the sudden gasps and chaos that was swirling around me, I looked first at Larry's eyes to see where he was staring. His eyes were fixed on my chest, so I looked down. With a decidedly high-pitched gasp, I watched as my green and white Bearcats sweatshirt began to expand in two prominent places. As I watched in fascinated horror, two breasts were growing from my chest. I could feel their weight growing with each frightened breath. Incredulous, I raised my hand to touch them, noting almost as an afterthought that the hand was smaller and slimmer, and that my nails were far longer than they should be, glistening with a clear polish.

"Larry..." I started, but my voice trailed off. What was I going to say? Larry, please help me? How could he help me? Powers far greater than I had ever imagined were remolding my entire body. I could feel it coursing over my entire body, leaving behind the weight of longer hair already tickling my ears. And what was clinging to the bottom of my ears? I could feel it in my face as the bones in my cheeks began to shift, almost as if there was something alive in there scuttling around.

My waist and stomach seemed to be contracting, almost as if air were being let out of a balloon, but I could feel the shift of bones in my pelvis as it became wider, and like my new chest, it was suddenly as if I had new weight in my butt. There was a tickling sensation in my legs as well, as if the hair on them was suddenly just not there any longer. That feeling was quickly replaced by the sensation of my legs, feet and ass being encased in something which clung to me almost like a second skin.

"My god, Jace!" Larry exclaimed. Except it didn't sound exactly like Larry. It was still a male voice, but not as deep or as mature. Was he being changed into a girl, too? Part of me hoped not—for his sake. Part of me, though, didn't want to be alone in this humiliation.

Of course, when I looked beyond Larry for a moment, it was obvious that I was not alone. Still in the throes of change, my teammates were

meeting their fate with a variety of reactions. While roughly half of them were taking on feminine characteristics at an alarming rate, the rest, although still male, were like Larry, becoming younger, more callow youths. Some seemed unaware of what was happening to them, staring at the Judge as if listening to a lecture. Others—only a few actually—were like Larry and me, examining our new anatomies as best we could with expressions of disbelief.

Why weren't we yelling and screaming? I don't really know. Maybe it was part of the magic which kept us under control. Maybe it was simply fear or shock. I knew—and I was certain some of my teammates knew—that this was the supernatural work of the mysterious Judge. Somehow, he was gifted with powers I had never imagined even existed. He had taken our entire team and, with the power of a few words in some arcane tongue, had transformed us into a group of young men and women who appeared no more than fifteen or sixteen years old. Part of me did want to cry out, but I was afraid. Yes, I'll admit it—I was very afraid. Now was not the time to challenge this powerful man—if he was, in fact, a man at all.

The sensations of transformation were beginning to abate at last. There had been no pain to endure, and I have no idea exactly how long the process took. I suspect it may have differed a little for each of us. I no longer felt as if there were live things crawling beneath my skin, and my anatomy appeared to have settled into its new form. The only odd sensations remaining were those I felt as my clothing continued to shift. My jeans had transformed into a soft aqua skirt cut well above the knee with small slits along the side. That had revealed dark pantyhose clinging to shapely legs, ending in a pair of black patent shoes—fortunately with only the hint of a heel. My new breasts were covered with a light sweater which matched my skirt. It did little to disguise my new shape. There was a small weight on my shoulder—a purse strap, I realized as I looked down. A strand or two of auburn hair lay over my slimmer shoulders as well, ending where I could see a slender gold chain which formed a feminine necklace ending about where my breasts began.

“My god, Jace,” the boy who had been Larry murmured, “you’re beautiful.”

But I didn’t want to be beautiful. I was weak in the knees from shock, and a look around the room told me I wasn’t alone. I didn’t know who was who. When you are enduring the sudden shock of watching your own body transform, becoming younger and changing sex in the process, it is a little difficult to take note of everything happening around you. I no longer recognized the collection of youths who shared the courtroom with me. I knew, of course, that the nice looking boy who stood next to me was my good friend, Larry, for I had watched him change. Why had he remained male while I became a... a girl?

I wasn’t alone in my sex change, though. Fully half the room had become female. Most of my teammates looked as if nothing was wrong. They shared the look of bored high school students everywhere, seemingly unconcerned that they were wearing skirts—and in some cases heels—for the first time in their lives. Several whispered to each other, occasionally eyeing one of the boys and giggling. Others patted their hair or stood trying to look interested with their arms folded under breasts that they treated as if they had had them all their lives.

A few, though, were like me, looking from side to side, trying to make some sense out of what had happened. Some were still boys, like Larry. There was confusion written on their faces, but also relief as well. They could see for themselves that about half of us had joined the distaff side, and they were thanking whatever powers were at work that they had been spared such an indignity. Some were like me, though, radically changed, our hair long, makeup in place, breasts heaving in alarm, and knees bare and shaking.

I looked up at the Judge. His face was impassive. Who—or what—was he? How could he wield such power over us? I wanted to demand an explanation. Perhaps I would have managed to work up enough courage to do so if I had had more time, but a woman’s voice suddenly called, “Thank you very much, Your Honor, for explaining the

municipal court system to us.”

Most of the crowd ignored her, but some of us who seemed to be more aware of what had happened turned to see a rather plain, well-dressed woman, perhaps fifty or so with her gray hair drawn back into a neat bun. Wasn't she standing where Coach Wallace had been only a few minutes before? Was this woman our transformed coach? If so, she had dropped about ten years and a lot of pounds, not to mention a whole new set of contours.

The Judge smiled an indulgent smile. “I'm always pleased to explain our legal system to your students, Miss Samson. I'm sure that I'll see at least one of your students as an attorney practicing in this very courtroom some fine day.” He looked out at all of us with a mock stern expression. “I certainly hope that is the only way I see any of you in this courtroom.”

Part 3

There was a smile on his face, and several of the ‘students’ laughed, but the message wasn't lost on those of us who realized what had happened to them. We were not expected to question what had been done to us. We were to accept it and move on with the new lives we had been given, or the consequences might not—would not—be pleasant. I looked around. No one appeared to be ready to challenge him. Then I looked back at the Judge. He was staring right at me! I lowered my eyes quickly. A cowardly act? Maybe, but I had just lost my manhood to powers I could not even imagine. I wasn't about to see what else I might lose.

“All right,” Miss Samson called out. “Now, everybody, go back to the bus. We need to get back to school for lunch before the cafeteria closes.”

A gaggle of talking, laughing students made their way back to the bus, oblivious to the fact that only minutes before, they were the Northwest Missouri State football team. Or at least most of them were oblivious. Here and there, there were furtive glances, worried looks, and

awkward movements, as if those individuals were unfamiliar with their bodies. I felt it myself.

When you're six-three and in shape to play football, you move through a crowd with authority, looking over shorter people and walking wherever you want to walk. People get out of your way. Now, thought, I was no longer a strong, powerful figure. My diminutive size made it difficult to see where I needed to go to get ahead. I was, I estimated, no more than five-five or five-six. While that made me as tall as many of the other girls in the crowd, I was considerably shorter than most of the boys. Also, I lacked the physical presence that had once made others get out of my way. Now, I was just a weak, puny girl. It was enough to bring me to the brink of tears. Tears! Oh my god! I hadn't cried since I was ten. Whatever was happening to me must be going past the physical aspects, I realized.

Suddenly, a hand gently grabbed my arm. I turned in surprise to see it was Larry—or at least the boy Larry had become. "Act natural," he whispered to me.

Gratefully, I let him guide me along. Although not as imposing as he had been when we played football together, Larry was still male, and the aura of male self-assuredness was still there. As grateful as I was, though, it bothered me to allow myself to be led as if I was his girlfriend or something through the meandering crowd, but what choice did I have?

The bus was still waiting for us in the parking lot, but although the same shape and size, it was now painted in the familiar orange-yellow with black trim that always identified school buses. 'Ovid School District' was printed neatly in black on the side of the bus beneath the windows. Had they changed buses on us? No, I thought, this bus looked to be the same as the one we had arrived on. Only the details had been changed to make it a school bus. After all, whatever power had changed us into a group of high school students would probably have little difficulty changing a bus to match.

We climbed on the bus, and for the first time in my new life, I learned what a problem wearing a skirt could be. There wasn't enough give in

the tight skirt to allow me to balance myself well enough to step onto the bus easily. Again, I was grateful and embarrassed at the same time to have Larry steady me up the step of the bus.

I chose a seat toward the rear of the bus, Larry sliding in next to me. I wanted to be in a position to see as many of my 'classmates' as possible, to determine who, like Larry and me, remembered our previous lives. I couldn't see everyone, but here and there, I could recognize telltale clues.

One big guy (of course most of the guys were big to me now) looked about with keen blue eyes. He wore a black letter sweater with a gold 'O' on it. With his blonde hair and square jaw, he looked almost like Wild Bill, but I suspected that wasn't who he was. He seemed too uncomfortable with who he was. I watched with amusement as he absently tugged at his pants, as if his crotch was uncomfortable. Whoever he had been, I mused, he apparently had a bigger set of balls than before. I found myself envying him.

Another 'couple' boarded the bus in apparent discomfort. The boy was tall and well muscled, but not in an obscene way. In fact, I found myself thinking he was... handsome. He had brown hair and big blue eyes that seemed unsure of what to make of the situation. He looked as if he wanted to put his arm around the girl who preceded him but had thought better about it. The girl was an attractive blonde, almost delicate in features with every pore of her body exuding femininity. She wore a very short, very feminine dress, and she was obviously not pleased about it. I felt sorry for her, since she was stumbling a bit in two-inch heels. At least I had been spared that indignity. They sat together, but I noticed she was practically out of her seat toward the aisle, as if the thought of sitting next to a boy was the worst thing she could imagine.

One of the last to board the bus was someone I assumed to be a teacher. She was much younger than Miss Samson and much prettier. She had dark reddish skin and nearly black hair, and the long silver earrings dangling from her small, half-hidden ears made her look like an exotic Indian princess. She wore a moderate amount of makeup

and a tan dress, belted at the waist. Like the blonde girl, she seemed to be having just a little difficulty walking in heels, but hers were a little higher and narrower than the blonde's. Like me, she was studying the transformees, looking for signs of recognition. She spotted me, and I could see her make a mental note of me.

The bus lurched forward, the roar of the engine causing the chatter on the bus to rise to an even higher level. It was just like all the high school bus rides I had been on when I was growing up, only now I was one of the girls.

"Sam!"

I ignored the call, although it seemed to be aimed at me, coming from an attractive brunette across the aisle. Then, she put a hand on my arm. "Sam, are you okay?"

Was that my name? Sam? How ironic that I would have a name which could easily belong to one of the boys. Oh, how I wished I was one of the boys!

"Sam, are you okay?"

Oh, sure, I thought. Never better. But I said, "Yes, I'm fine..." My voice trailed off. I had no idea what her name was.

"What time are you and Danny going to the game?"

"The game?" I said stupidly.

The girl looked at me with concern. "Samantha Wallace, what is wrong with you?"

"I'm sorry," I said, recovering as quickly as I could. "I was just thinking about something else."

"Probably just thinking about Danny," she said with a mischievous grin, looking meaningfully at Larry. So that was his name now—Danny. And I was Samantha—Sam for short—Wallace. I wondered perversely if I was related to Coach Wallace's family now. Did he have relatives in Ovid? I doubted it.

"Just... thinking," I replied.

“Anyhow, you guys want to sit with Jack and me?” She was sitting next to a tall guy with a shock of blond hair. He was grinning in a satisfied manner, his arm draped around the brunette’s shoulders. It was almost impossible to believe that they had once been teammates who would never dream of acting the way they were acting now. It was obvious they had no idea who they had once been.

“Sure,” I managed to say. I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Fortunately, I didn’t need to say anything else. The bus screeched to a halt, and I realized I had paid no attention to our route. I supposed it didn’t really matter. I was at a high school now, expected to be a high school coed. But what did that mean? Once, I had a dream that I was back in high school but had no idea of what classes to attend or what my assignments were. It was an uncomfortable dream, but I hadn’t considered it a nightmare. Now, I was living that dream, and it seemed to be a certified nightmare.

I looked quickly in the purse. There were the standard women’s cosmetics, which caused me to shudder a bit, a wallet, and a key ring. There appeared to be a locker key on the ring, but which locker?

The brunette came to my unexpected rescue. “Let’s let Jack and Danny save us a place at lunch while we freshen up,” she suggested, motioning with her head at a tall, lanky blond guy I assumed rightly to be Jack.

Freshen up? Oh my god, I thought, she wants me to go touch up our makeup and maybe even go to the bathroom. I had no knowledge of the first activity and wanted to put off the second one for as long as possible. But there was this little odd feeling inside me which told me I would not be able to avoid an introduction to my new anatomy very long.

Dutifully, I followed her off the bus, while Jack led ‘Danny’ off, presumably to the cafeteria. We entered a large, one-story building made of tan brick. A flag flew in front, next to a large wooden sign which proclaimed in black letters over a gold background, ‘Ovid High School.’ In smaller script, the black letters declared, ‘Home of the

Fighting Eagles!’

It took me back, to walk down the main hallway of Ovid High for the very first time. I remembered my own high school days so clearly. Of course, I had been one of the jocks. I was a good student, too, but my scholastic interests often took a back seat to my interest in sports—particularly football. Now here I was, back in high school. Only this time, I was in a skirt. This wasn’t going to be easy, I thought.

“Aren’t you going to get anything out of your locker?” the brunette asked. I suddenly realized we had stopped in front of a bank of lockers and she was opening hers.

“Huh?” Gee, that sounded intelligent, I thought to myself.

“Boy, you really are a space case today, Sam,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s not time for your period yet is it?”

Period? Period?

“Uh...no.” At least I hoped it wasn’t. My god, I could—would—have periods. I could get pregnant. No, I couldn’t. To get pregnant, I would have to let some guy... No, that wouldn’t happen. I’d never ever let that happen—not in a million zillion years. Never.

The brunette dived into my purse, which I had forgotten to close. She deftly pulled my keys out and opened the locker next to her own.

“Sam, I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but maybe you should go see the school nurse. You just aren’t yourself today.”

I’m not myself? I thought, almost laughing out loud. Was that ever an understatement! What would this girl say if I told her I was supposed to be a six foot three football player. She would look at me as if I was crazy. Then I could tell her that she used to be one, too. Yes, I’m sure the school nurse would prescribe a nice rubber room for me someplace where I could twiddle my toes for the rest of my life.

“I’m just a little off balance,” I said with a wan smile.

She touched my arm. “Sam, you and Danny aren’t having problems, are you?”

Oh, so ‘Danny’ was more than just a casual Friday night date. Somehow, it figured. How serious were we supposed to be? Had he gotten to first base? Second? Third? Home run?

“No, we’re fine,” I assured her. But were we? I could use a friend now, and Larry—or Danny as I would have to get used to calling him—had been my friend for a long time. Could our friendship survive my abrupt change of sex? I found myself hoping that it would.

“Then get your notebook and your history book and let’s get to lunch.”

I grabbed the notebook and history text she had indicated and meekly followed her down the hall. Students along the way called out, “Hi, Sam! Hi, Jessica!” I just smiled and called “hi” back to them. At least I had found out the brunette’s name.

I felt like an interloper in the girl’s restroom. I tried to emulate what Jessica was doing. She mostly touched up her lipstick which, to me, didn’t even look like it needed touching up. Of course, neither did mine, I thought, noticing its taste for the first time. Still, I went through the motions. I didn’t want to appear out of character.

Danny and Jack were waiting for us as we got our lunch trays. I sat the tray down and looked at the food. The portions were almost minuscule. Years of football training tables had left me with a big appetite, and I couldn’t see how this tiny lunch was going to get me through the day.

“We thought you guys got lost,” Jack commented.

“We had to make ourselves beautiful for you,” Jessica explained. Well, she had made herself beautiful. I had merely followed her into the girl’s room and pretended to touch up my lipstick. Actually, as I said, I had barely let it touch my lips. It felt like there was plenty there already.

Jessica hadn’t used one of the stalls, so I put that off, too. I was now finding I had cause to regret that. The need to pee seemed far more urgent to me than it had when I was male. I would have to eat quickly and get back into the girl’s room before class.

The conversation was inconsequential. We were just four high school friends having lunch together. Danny and I let Jack and Jessica carry most of the conversation, keeping to short answers whenever we could. I was amazed at how complete the transformation had been for Jack and Jessica. I knew they had been our teammates—either that or members of the flight crew. Yet they seemed to have become exactly what they looked like—two high school students. And there was no way of telling that Jessica had ever been male. Who had she been before? I wondered. Was she one of my good friends, or maybe one of the guys I didn't talk to much. I would probably never know, I realized.

I almost envied Jack and Jessica. They were unaware that they had ever been anyone else. They fit into the community perfectly. Neither would ever have to pretend to be someone they had not been before, as Danny and I would. But another part of me disagreed. I might not look like Jason Stromberg anymore, but I knew I had been him once. All my memories, all my ideas, were still there. If I had to build a new life as Samantha Wallace, it would be Jason Stromberg who did it.

Jessica looked suddenly at her watch, then at me. "We need to go to the little girl's room before class." It wasn't a request—it was a command. Of course, I realized. This was part of the female ritual. If one girl in a group had to go to the bathroom, every girl in the group had to go to the bathroom. Well, why not? I had planned to go on my own if I had to.

Jack gave Jessica a chaste kiss, promising to see her in class. I swear Danny was thinking about doing the same, but instead he just gave me a little wave. I was off to the girl's room again.

This time, there was no avoiding the inevitable—I had to pee and I had to pee badly. I was afraid by the time I hiked up my skirt and pulled down my pantyhose, being careful not to rip them, I would find wet panties, but I had managed to hold back. The instant my newly expanded bottom hit the seat, my new muscles relaxed, and I felt instantaneous relief. It was a different feeling than peeing as a male, but the relief was equally pleasant. I felt as if I had two gallons stored up inside me, so I was surprised when only a small amount sprayed

out of me. Apparently, my bladder was much smaller.

A lot of things were smaller, I thought to myself. The lunch I had thought would be far too small had proven to be adequate. In fact, I had even left part of it, my new stomach full. Of course, I was much smaller than I had been before, I knew, as I unconsciously wiped myself and got dressed. At least I wouldn't have the temptation to bulk up as I had while playing football, I realized as I touched up my lipstick. That would save on food...

Wait a minute! I looked at myself in the mirror as if I had just come out of a trance. In a way, I suppose I had. I had wiped myself like a girl. Sure, I knew they did that after they peed, but I had never done that before—yet I seemed to know just what to do. I hadn't even taken the time to examine my new privates. Then, I had been so deep in thought that I had marched right over to the mirror and reapplied lipstick as if I had done it hundreds of times before—again without really thinking about it.

What did all this mean? Was I about to lose my identity like so many of the others? I hoped not. As much as I disliked being this girl, I didn't want to forget who I had been. Maybe it was just part of the magic, I thought. Maybe when you didn't fight it, you just acted the way you were supposed to act. Was there some way to test that thought? Maybe.

Jessica was waiting for me outside the restroom. "Come on, let's go to class," she said.

I shook my head, feeling the auburn tresses drift across my shoulders. "You go ahead," I told her. "I need to go back to my locker." I didn't really need to go to my locker. I just wanted to test my theory. If I was right, I would be able to walk to class without thinking about where I was going. Of course, if I was wrong, I had given up a golden opportunity to be led to where I needed to be. Still, that was part of my nature. I had to try.

"Okay," she said. Then, stopping her turn, "Are you sure you're okay?"

I smiled what I hoped was a confident smile. "I'm fine."

After Jessica left, I tried to blank my mind. I couldn't do it—I don't think anyone really can. Then I realized that we do things by rote when we're thinking about something else. What could I think about? My past life? I wondered what had become of us outside Ovid. Had we been reported missing when our plane was overdue? Surely we had. That meant there would be a search for us. It wasn't every day that a plane drops out of sight in clear weather while carrying a college football team.

But what if we weren't missing—at least as far as the world outside Ovid was concerned? After all, any agency powerful enough to turn a college football team into a group of high school students might be able to reshape the rest of the world enough to make it seem as if we had never existed.

But if that was the case, what agency could have such power? Countless thousands of lives would have been changed. My parents, my brother and sister, all my relatives and friends, and everyone else I had ever met would have a different set of memories. Multiply that by all of my teammates on the plane and the number would be incredible. But wait! That would mean there would be a new team at Northwest Missouri State composed of guys who weren't there before. All their lives would be changed as well. Instead of playing for another school, they would now be Bearcats. Where would it all end? How could such a power exist? It went beyond magic; it was god-like.

I sat down, and the world I had been seeking to ignore rushed back around me. I had been walking down the hall, lost in thought, and my feet had taken me into a classroom and over to an empty desk right next to Larry—er, Danny.

"Are you okay?" he asked me over the din of the pre-class conversation.

"Why does everybody keep asking me that?" I muttered.

"How did you find this classroom?" he wanted to know, speaking so that only I could hear.

“It was an experiment,” I replied. “It seems if we sit back and just let things happen, we act like the people we’ve become.” I gave a little shudder. How far would that go? What sort of a girl was Samantha Wallace anyway? If I just let myself go, would I find myself in the back seat of some guy’s car on some lonely country road? I would have to be careful.

“We need to talk after class,” he offered.

I nodded. Maybe we could go somewhere after school and talk. Did one of us have a car? For that matter, were either of us now old enough to drive? I quickly looked in my purse, pushing by all the cosmetics to find my wallet and keys. The keys were on top of the wallet, but there was nothing that looked like a car key. That was a bad sign. The wallet confirmed it. There was no driver’s license anywhere. The only picture ID I had was my student ID. According to my birth date, I was only fifteen. That was going to throw a crimp in any plans I might come up with.

It turned out we were in a World History class. The teacher was Miss Samson who I suspected had once been our coach. If so, she showed no signs of remembering who she had been. She taught the class with the poise and experience of someone who had been teaching it for years, and her manner was decidedly feminine.

The class was made up mostly of students who had that same semi-transparent appearance we had first observed at the airport. Although they seemed normal enough and were apparently solid as evidenced by the way their seats moved when they leaned back, there was something about them that made you think you could see through them. Some of the other students were apparently our former teammates—or at least people like them. They seemed to be completely at ease with who they had become and noticed nothing unusual.

Two of the girls looked a little uncomfortable, though. One was a very attractive Hispanic girl, with long black hair that practically shined. She kept tugging at her short skirt as if by doing so she could cover her smooth legs. She would look around every now and then as if

embarrassed that someone might see them. Then, she would redden when it became apparent to her that more than one boy in the room was watching her appreciatively.

The other girl was an attractive although hardly beautiful brunette who seemed to be tuned out as far as Miss Samson's lecture was concerned. She instead was closely examining her hands, touching the tips of her feminine fingernails as if to test if they were real. She kept brushing her long brown hair away from her face as if she wasn't used to wearing it that long.

Danny noticed, too, and we made eye contact long enough to realize that we had to stop both of those girls and talk with them after class. I took the Hispanic girl as the class bell rang, gently touching her arm. She jumped suddenly. I think she had been afraid that one of the boys had grabbed her. I wish, I thought.

Danny had gotten the attention of the other girl, and in moments, we were huddled outside the classroom. The two girls looked a little nervous at Danny's presence. It was obvious that neither had ever socialized with boys in the role of girls before.

"Look," I started out, "we haven't got much time until the next class. I was Jace Stromberg and this guy was Larry Gunn. You both remember who you were, too, don't you?"

"Thank god!" the Hispanic girl practically cried. "I was wondering if I was the only one who remembered." Like all of us, she had also picked up a little bit of an Oklahoma twang, but her voice also carried the lilting inflections of someone who had been raised to speak another language. "I'm—or I was—Bert Hazleton."

My mouth flew open. Bert had been about my size when he played second-string wide receiver for the team. He had also been blonde and very fair skinned, almost to the point that he tended to sunburn rather than tan. Now, here he was, petite and dark, looking absolutely nothing like the Bert I remembered.

"My name is Teresa Gonzales now," she continued nervously. "I've got to figure out a way to get back to my own life. There's a big guy on

the football team here who thinks I'm his girl. He told me he'd meet me after the game, and I'm scared to death."

I hoped there was a way, but what would it be? I just gave her a sympathetic nod and looked at the other girl.

"I was Austin Blake," she said simply. Austin had been a junior and a second string halfback. I hadn't known him very well. He was one of the guys who kept pretty much to himself. I knew that he had a long-time girlfriend who had followed him to college, and he lived with her off campus. He didn't party much with the team, and I didn't think I had said a dozen words to him since we had met.

"Have you found any others who remember?" Danny asked.

The girl who had been Austin bit her lip in thought, leaving a small amount of bright pink lipstick on her teeth. "No..." she replied at last, shaking her head slowly. "At least I'm not sure. No, wait! The pilot—I noticed the pilot."

"Is she a student here now?" I asked.

"I don't think so. I saw her change into another young woman. When we went to the bus, she left the group. She didn't seem to notice anything odd. I don't think she remembers a thing. I think she's older than we are—now."

I filed that in memory. If we ever came up with a plan for getting out of Ovid, it would have been handy to have a pilot. No such luck, though.

The bell rang again. We were due in another class. Bert—Teresa now—looked stricken. "I don't know where I'm supposed to be."

"Calm down," I told him—her. Then I explained to all of my former teammates the technique I had discovered to find my next class. I used it myself again, finding myself in a home economics class surrounded by two dozen other girls. If I had still been Jace, I would have thought I had died and gone to heaven. Not one of the girls was homely. While some were prettier than others, there wasn't a one I wouldn't have found attractive as Jace. Apparently, the powers that ruled Ovid had decided that ugly was out.

Most of the girls had that same transparent look that was so common in Ovid, but a few were real. Of the real ones, only three of us seemed to know who we had been. Austin—who was now named Darla Hastings—and a pretty blonde girl who was carefully watching Darla and me. She was the same blonde I had noticed on the bus—the girl who looked so uncomfortable. I didn't have a chance to talk to her before class, though. In fact, Darla and I had arrived late, suffering the silent frown of the teacher.

Our teacher, who I later learned was named Ms. Morrison, really got into her subject. She really looked like the Beaver's mother. Not exactly, I mean, but she wore a skirt and blouse, neatly pressed and very feminine, her blonde hair was neatly in place, and her makeup was flawlessly feminine without exaggeration. The fact that she was partially transparent did nothing to detract from her appearance. Apparently, I had landed smack dab in the middle of the sewing part of the syllabus. Now, I had never so much as sewed a button back on a shirt before, so if I was going to look normal, I had a lot of learning to do. Fortunately, we were still in the lecture stage, so I had a chance to catch up.

By the end of the class, I had even sewed a button on a shirt and a hemmed a skirt. To be honest, I wasn't very good at it.

"Samantha, haven't you ever helped your mother with sewing before?" Miss Morrison asked with an almost motherly frown.

"I'm afraid not," I answered truthfully. In my real family, my mother did most of the sewing for my sister, brother, dad and me. Even my older sister never did much sewing. Oh, I suppose mom had at least taught her how, but she never took to it.

"Darla, show her how to do that hem straighter," she said, moving along to the next girl.

Darla? I looked over at my former teammate. She had an embarrassed smile on her face.

"You know how to sew?" I asked her in a whisper as I looked down at the straight hem she had just finished.

She shrugged and whispered back, "I grew up with three sisters. Mom taught them to sew and just figured why not teach me while she was at it?"

"I suppose you can cook, too," I ventured.

"Sure can. I do a mean pineapple upside down cake."

I'll be darned if we didn't both giggle.

The blonde stopped us after class. "I'm Darren McDougal," she said without preamble. When Darla and I had introduced ourselves, she went on, "Look, we've got to figure some way out of this."

Part 4

"I'm all for that," I said honestly. I didn't want to remain a girl if I didn't have to, but I didn't think it was the sort of thing you went to the doctor to get an antibiotic for. 'Hi, doc, I've just grown tits and my balls have disappeared. Do you have something for that?'

"Then let's get organized," she said with a grin.

I held up my hand. "Look... Say, what do I call you?"

She frowned. "I told you, Jace, I'm Darren."

I shook my head. "Look, that isn't going to work. We can't go around here calling ourselves Austin, Darren and Jace. Look at us. People will think we've lost our minds."

Darren growled, "What do we care if these ghosts think we've lost our minds?"

"Shades."

We both turned to Darla, who up to now had had little to say. "They're called shades," she clarified. "I was talking to a girl at lunch about it and..."

"Wait a minute," I stopped her. "A real girl? Not one of these shades?"

"Yes," Darla confirmed. "A real girl. We aren't the only ones who've been transformed. Apparently, the Judge has been doing this to people for a couple of months now. The girl I was talking to had been

a guy like us. She—he then—was caught speeding by that weird cop. The Judge told him he'd change him and make him young enough that he wouldn't be able to speed for a while. She's too young to drive now."

'Talk about revoking someone's license,' I thought.

"Anyhow, I guess these shades are as real as we are. They're solid to the touch and they don't have any more inkling of what's going on here than most of our teammates do."

"But the girl you were talking to," Darren pressed. "That means there's more people here who remember who they were. We need to contact them."

"She won't help us," Darla said. "She's been here long enough that she's gotten used to being a girl. She even has a steady boyfriend."

Darren blanched. "Then we have to do whatever we're going to do before some of our guys feel the same way. I'll let Coach Jessup know."

"Coach Jessup remembers?" I asked, suddenly curious.

Darren nodded. "Yeah. He's the Social Studies teacher now. They gave him the name of Ms. Drew. I got a chance to talk to him on the bus. Since they made him a teacher, he thinks he might be able to get us organized."

"Organized?" Darla asked.

"Yeah," Darren said. "Look Austin, we're still a team, no matter what we look like. If we all stand up to that Judge, we should be able to force him to change us back."

Darla shook her head. "I don't know. I don't think that's such a good idea."

Darren snorted, "Pussy!" She then stormed away.

"Yeah," Darla agreed. "So?" But I don't think Darren heard her. And we still didn't know her name.

As I came out of my last class, Danny was there to meet me. "How did the rest of your day go?" he asked me with a little grin.

"Oh great," I said sarcastically. "How did you know where to meet me?"

He shrugged. "I just did the same thing you did and let my feet do the walking. I stopped here, so I assumed this was where I was supposed to be. I found out I have a car, so I guess I'm supposed to drive you home."

"You don't even know where I live," I pointed out.

Another shrug. "I'll just think about something else and drive there on autopilot."

I wasn't so sure I wanted someone driving me around this strange town without thinking about where they were going. But what other choice did I really have? I was too tired to try to figure out which school bus went by my house. I fell in step with him.

His car was an old Mazda, but it was in decent shape. Apparently Danny's family had enough money to buy him a car when he turned sixteen because I knew he couldn't be much older than me. Either that or he had one heck of a paper route.

As we drove, I told Danny what had happened that afternoon.

He nodded. "I know all about Coach Jessup."

"You do? How?"

"Wild Bill Moreland was in Spanish class with me this afternoon," Danny explained.

"So who did he become?" I secretly hoped he had become a girl with big tits. He was always bragging about his sexual exploits, claiming to be 'a boob man.' It would be very appropriate if he had a set of his own.

I was doomed to be disappointed though. "He's still a guy," Danny told me. "He isn't quite as big as he was, but he's all male. And get this, he's a quarterback on the high school football team."

“No!” I was pissed beyond belief. Here I was, in makeup and skirts while that big prick... well, he still had a prick. It wasn’t fair.

We had pulled up in front of a comfortable middle class two-story not too dissimilar from the one I had grown up in. “Do you live here?” I asked.

He grinned. “No, but I think you do. Your technique for getting around works pretty well.”

“Uh, do you want to come in?” I really didn’t want to face my ‘family’ alone.

“Sorry. I have to go home myself. Besides, I have to get ready to take you out on our date.” He was grinning impishly.

I gave him a playful slug on his shoulder. “You asshole. It’s not a date. We’re just going to the game together.”

“Can I hold your hand tonight?”

I flushed. “Danny!”

He laughed, “Okay, I’ll see you tonight.”

As he drove away, I was left alone in front of the house that was supposed to be my home.

I sighed to myself. At least I lived in a nice neighborhood. I suppose I could have been stuck with a lot worse. Having grown up in a nice suburb of Kansas City, the son of a doctor, I had become accustomed to pleasant surroundings. I wondered what my new parents did for a living. And did I have any brothers or sisters? Well, there was only one way to find out.

I opened the door with the house key I had found in my purse. To be honest, I was frightened half to death. It was one thing to try to be Samantha Wallace while surrounded by casual friends and my former teammates at the high school. It was quite another to try to play my role with my new ‘family.’ There were just so many variables—all of which I would be expected to know. I would just have to be as passive as I possibly could until I got the lay of the land.

“Is that you, Samantha?” a woman’s voice called from somewhere in the house.

“It’s me!” I called back. I almost added “mom” but I wasn’t sure if the voice belonged to my mother. It might be an older sister, an aunt, my father’s mistress (just joking) or whoever. I looked around quickly for some clue and was rewarded by what was obviously a family portrait over the fireplace. It showed a middle-aged couple, quite attractive, a girl—me—and a boy of perhaps twelve. Judging from the face I had seen in the mirror and comparing it to my face in the picture, it appeared to be quite recent.

“I’m glad you’re home early,” my ‘mom’ said entering the room. She could not deny me. She had the same auburn hair I now had and looked like an older version of me. Although the portrait had not shown it, she was one of the shades. She was wearing a pair of khaki slacks and a white knit blouse. She smiled when she saw me. “You always look so pretty in that outfit, Samantha.”

I felt my face flushing. I wasn’t used to being called pretty, although I knew I now was.

“Your father and I have to go to that barbecue over at the Hendersons,” she explained. “He’s coming by to pick me up in a few minutes. I left you a note on the counter, and your dinner is in the oven. You’re still going to the game tonight with Danny, aren’t you?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Okay,” she said with a smile. “By the way, Josh will be staying over at Paul’s house tonight. I left you the number and the Henderson’s number in case anything comes up. Of course, your dad will have his pager if you need him.”

I just listened. She was giving me a wealth of information. Josh had to be my brother, and if my new father had a pager, it meant he had to be on call. What was he? A doctor like my father? I wasn’t sure. It also meant I would be left alone in the house for a while. That would give me plenty of time to explore my new surroundings. By the time my new family had returned, I would at least have a rough idea of where

everything was.

“There’s your father now,” she announced as I heard the sound of a vehicle in the driveway. She rushed away, presumably back to her bedroom to finish getting ready.

The door opened, and the man in the portrait walked in. He was tall—about as tall as I had been until a few hours ago. His hair was short and partially gray, and he had a rugged, suntanned face, even if it was a little transparent. Apparently, I was to be surrounded by shades. Somehow, that didn’t bother me. From what I had seen of the shades so far, they were just normal people.

He grinned at me. “Hi, sweetheart! I’m surprised to see you here. I thought you’d be with Danny.”

“I’ll see him tonight,” I replied, a little uncomfortable at being called ‘sweetheart.’

“Well, give him my best,” he said, heading for the bedroom. “I’ve got to get cleaned up. I’ve been treating Jim Carson’s horse and I smell a little like one.”

With that, he was off to get changed. So he was a vet. One of my friends in high school had been the son of a vet. I knew that in many ways, being a vet was as demanding as my own real father’s occupation—particularly in a small agricultural town like Ovid. He would be expected to treat everything from small dogs and cats to horses and cows.

At least I had been given a normal, middle class family, I thought. I had a professional father, a mother who I suspected stayed at home, a younger brother, and... What was Danny? He was my old friend, Larry, of course. But what else was he in the scheme of things in Ovid? He was obviously my boyfriend. My friends knew it and my family knew it. But how close were we supposed to be? I hoped not very close because I wasn’t ready to be somebody’s girlfriend. Not now—and maybe not ever. I was grateful Danny remembered being Larry. It would make it much easier for us to stay just friends than if he had nothing but memories of me being his close girlfriend. I pitied

Teresa who would have to fight off a big football player who thought she had always been his girlfriend.

The game was at seven, and Danny had agreed to pick me up about six thirty so we could get good seats with Jack and Jessica. It was not even five yet, so I had plenty of time to get ready. I mean, how much time would I need? I'd just slip on a pair of jeans and be ready to go in five minutes, so I had plenty of time to look around.

While my parents got ready for their own social event, I checked out what 'mom' had made for my dinner. I had been surprised that the tiny lunch I had been given at school had actually lasted me all afternoon. It must have been because I was smaller and less athletic now, because had I tried to eat so little at lunch when I was Jace, I would have been starving by now. Dinner looked a lot better and the portion was larger than lunch. There was another plus, I thought as I looked at the plate of baked chicken. My new mother was apparently a good cook. Thank God for small favors.

My new parents left for their barbecue as I was eating. I found that waving goodbye to them wasn't sufficient. As their daughter, I was expected to hug and kiss them. It felt okay to hug my mother, but getting a kiss from my father seemed unnatural. My real father and I had not kissed since I was a small child, so the experience felt odd—not unpleasant, but odd.

So I was left alone in my new house, dinner eaten, 'family' gone, and time to kill. I used it to my advantage, exploring the house, figuring out all the little things I would be expected to know. I moved from room to room, stopping to explore, to examine everything I saw. I was actually relieved to see that if I had to be a girl, at least I was going to be part of a family not too different in some ways from my own. It would make it easier for me to adapt.

Adapt?

I had been a girl for only a few hours and yet I was thinking about adapting. Shouldn't I be thinking about how to get this magic reversed? I thought. After all, I wasn't meant to be a girl. I was meant

to be Jason Stromberg, football player and history major. I suppose I should be less resigned to my fate, but I knew powerful magic was at work. What could I do to overcome it? My best strategy was to wait and see if Coach Jessup could do something and help him—her. Our only chance was to stick together as a team. Until then, I would have to play the hand I was dealt.

I had saved my room and my ‘brother’s’ room for last. As I walked into his room, I felt pangs of envy. Why couldn’t I have been turned into a boy—even a younger one like my new brother? I knew how to be a boy. I could still play football then and do all the things boys do. It might have actually been fun to be twelve or so again—as a boy—and grow up all over again. What would I do differently if I could? Well, I would probably have concentrated on school a little more. I made good grades, but not good enough to give me the background and study habits I would have needed to follow in my real father’s footsteps as a doctor. I had often regretted that I hadn’t been a more serious student. The idea of being a doctor actually appealed to me.

I sighed, looking around—what was his name? Oh yes, Josh—around Josh’s room one more time. Lucky little prick, I thought. I’d give a lot to change places with him.

At last came the room I had been avoiding—my own. I had visions of what it would look like. I was sure it would be all feminine with plenty of lace and soft pastels like my sister’s room had been. There would be little fluffy pillows, a doll or teddy bear on the bed, and maybe a poster of some rock star displaying lots of muscles and a bulge in the crotch of his tight pants.

I was a little relieved when I saw I was wrong. Well, partially wrong at least. There were a couple of fluffy pillows. And the peach-colored walls and small flower patterns on the curtains were most certainly feminine, but there were no dolls, teddy bears, or rock star posters in evidence. Apparently, Samantha was feminine in tastes but not overtly so.

I still had plenty of time before Danny picked me up. I even thought about calling him and cancelling out to take advantage of my time

alone, but to be honest, I did want to watch the football game. I still loved the game and regretted that my playing days seemed to be over, but some of my old teammates were still male and could be on the team. I wanted to be there to cheer them on.

I had no intention of doing so dressed like a wanna-be cheerleader. There would be no skirts for me. Of course, I couldn't exactly dress out of character, but a lot of girls wore jeans and sweatshirts and sneakers to football games. I planned to be one of them.

I have to admit, what happened after that was my own fault. I really did have plenty of time, particularly, I thought, if I allowed myself to go into automatic mode to get dressed. I looked through my large closet, selecting an Ovid High sweatshirt, a pair of jeans, and white sneakers. From a drawer, I found a pair of athletic socks. No one would mistake me for a boy, but at least I would be dressed in a manner that was comfortable and familiar to me.

The mistake I made was using time I could have spent getting ready to examine myself. I had gone to the restroom earlier at school, but I had been in a hurry and had been in no mood to examine what was in my panties. I had just made a quick wipe and gotten dressed again as quickly as possible. Now, though, I had had a few more hours to adjust to who I had become. As a result, I decided to play just a little bit.

Like my real sister's room, Sam had a full-length mirror attached to the back of the door. After carefully closing the curtains, I decided to treat myself to a striptease. Humming a little bump and grind music to myself, a seductively pulled off my dress, admiring myself standing there in a bra, panties and pantyhose. It wasn't exactly spangles and garter belts like I had seen on a quick trip to a Kansas City topless joint a few weeks earlier with Larry and some of my other teammates. But I had to admit that if I were in my old body, Sam would turn me on.

She—I—had a very nice body. Although I was only fifteen and still developing, my breasts were already large and firm, and the rest of my figure, although not fully adult, would be mature in a matter of months. My legs were long and graceful. Maybe I could actually be a

model. That long auburn hair and classic face were of a type photographers looked for.

Or I could be the *Playboy* Playmate in a couple of years, I thought wickedly. I sat down on my bed, still looking into the mirror, trying to imitate the poses I had often seen in the men's magazines—or at least the more tasteful magazines. Maybe a little more skin. I peeled off the pantyhose and flipped my long hair up with my hand, posing in front of the mirror.

Looking back on it, I don't think I had really accepted my new body yet. It was more like divorcing my mind from my body, pretending to watch an attractive girl go through the poses for me. The girl posing seductively in the mirror wasn't really me. I was still Jace Stromberg, sitting in my room back at college, looking through the latest issue of *Playboy* at the dynamite young girl represented in the glossy pictures. It wasn't really me who pulled out a pair of off-white heels from the closet, removed her bra, and stood with bedroom eyes, one hand under a breast while the other hand played with the waistband of her panties. It wasn't really me who pulled off those panties and stood with her legs spread and her sex prominently displayed. It wasn't really me who jumped guiltily a foot into the air when the phone at her bedside suddenly rang.

"He... hello?" I stammered, standing there in the nude, the phone shaking in my hand. Whoever it is can't see you, I kept telling myself, but I still felt like I had been caught in the act.

"It's just me," Danny's voice said. I unconsciously tried to cover my crotch and breasts with the one hand that wasn't holding the phone. I nearly dropped the phone in the process.

"I had to look up your number. Your own phone, huh?" Danny asked.

"Uh...yes."

"Well," he went on, "I just thought I'd call and tell you I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes?" I looked at the clock on my nightstand. I had lost

track of time. My little act in front of the mirror had gone on longer than I thought.

“Is that a problem?”

I wasn’t about to develop a reputation of not being ready on time. So many girls almost made it a point to be late. It couldn’t be that hard to get ready, could it? “No—not at all—bye!” I was in such a hurry I practically slammed down the phone.

I quickly put the panties back on. The bra was another matter, but with a little effort, I managed to get it on, too. Next would be the sweatshirt. I got in on in no time, but somehow, it just didn’t look right. Having worn sweatshirts most of my life, I just couldn’t stand what it did to me. As Jace, I had looked manly in a sweatshirt since I was fifteen. This sweatshirt was almost a parody of that. True, it hid my breasts, but the huge sweatshirt on my slender frame just didn’t look good at all. I looked like a war refugee. Slipping it off and pulling the hair back out of my eyes, I managed to find a cranberry turtleneck sweater in the closet. It didn’t look too feminine, and it did look as if it would be warm enough to ward off the fall evening chill. I slipped it on. It looked fine. The breasts were in evidence, but not voluptuously so.

Next came the jeans. I pulled them up over my legs. They felt like jeans, but something was wrong. They were way too tight. I managed to pull them up over my widened hips. They fastened fine at my slender waist, but the way they fit...

I looked in the mirror. They honestly looked as if they had been painted on. Every curve and smooth line of my body was outlined in denim blue. This wasn’t the look I wanted! I wanted a pair of nice, baggy jeans. Instead of hiding my femininity, I had accentuated it. I looked at the clock. Danny would be there any minute. I couldn’t go like this, though, could I?

There was only one thing to do. Since I was making a hash of things, it was time to go on automatic. I only hoped my automatic side would agree with my need to be on time. Apparently, it did. I dashed into the bathroom, ran a hairbrush through my long hair, touched up my

lipstick, and grabbed a pair of shoes from the closet, all in record time just as the doorbell rang. All of this was done without conscious effort, which was fine with me since I had obviously severely underestimated how much time it would take me to get ready to go.

Danny was dressed in a very similar fashion to me. His sweater was navy blue, though, and of course, his jeans had a traditional male fit instead of the ones I had painted on. It allowed him to wear sneakers as well. Unfortunately the shoes my unconscious mind had selected were a pair of black flats. It was too late to go back for sneakers, and to be honest, I don't think I would have been able to pull athletic socks up under the tight fitting leg of the jeans.

Danny grinned appreciatively when I opened the door. "Hey, how about that? A girl who can be ready to go on time."

"I'm not a girl," I argued, still pleased that I had been able to do something that wasn't stereotypically feminine—like getting ready on time.

He looked at me carefully. "Well, you could have fooled me."

For some reason, I was pleased again. I should have been annoyed at his statement, for I didn't want to be a girl. Still, I supposed, if I had to be a girl, it was better to be one as attractive as Samantha Wallace.

"Let's go," I said.

"Aren't you going to take your purse?"

"Oh, sure." Damn, I had forgotten that girls always carry a purse. I was so used to carrying everything I needed in a wallet in my back pocket. With the extra padding I had back there covered by skin tight jeans, I would have no choice but to carry a purse. "I'll just be a minute."

I rushed back upstairs and grabbed the purse off my bed, stopping for a moment to look at myself in the mirror. I fussed a little with a lock of hair that didn't look quite right. I looked great—for a girl—but I wondered if in my rush I had forgotten anything. I studied myself for a moment until I heard, "Are you ready?" from the bottom of the stairs.

Good lord! I was primping. I was all ready to go. All I had needed to do

was get the damn purse and go. Instead, I had started looking at myself in the mirror again. I was only going to a stupid high school football game. If I spent this much time and effort getting ready for this, how much time would I spend when I had to be really dressed up? I had only been a girl for a few hours and it was already becoming a pain in the ass—both figuratively and with the tight jeans, literally.

“We ought to be able to identify a few more of our teammates tonight,” Danny suggested as we drove to the game.

“I hope so,” I agreed. “If we can find a large enough group that remembers who they were, we might be able to figure a way out of here.”

“So how is your family?” he asked.

I gave him a quick rundown on my new parents. As I told him about them, I began to realize to myself that I had been very fortunate. I could have done a lot worse. “How about yours?” I asked.

He smiled. “Well, it took me a little time to get home after I left your house. I had a little car trouble.”

“What happened?” I asked. “It seems to be running fine now.”

“Oh, it is,” he agreed. “It was just a flat. I hit a nail. That strange cop—Officer Mercer—saw me and helped me out. He even took me home and promised he’d get my car to me later. Sure enough, an hour later, it was in my driveway, the tire as good as new. Even the gas tank was filled. You know, while he was helping, he never cracked a smile. And how did he happen to be there just when I needed help?”

“It’s strange all right,” I agreed. It seemed as if the mysterious Officer Mercer was always just where he needed to be—at the airport, in the courtroom, even helping Danny. At least the last had been of benefit to one of my teammates. Maybe it was because he saw us as residents of Ovid now. Protect and serve and all that.

“My parents are about like yours,” Danny explained. “They’re both shades. My ‘father’ runs a farm equipment business selling tractors and farm implements like ploughs and stuff. My ‘mother’ sells real

estate. Apparently, I've got an older brother, but he's away at college at the University of Oklahoma."

"Do you suppose he's really at the university?" I asked suddenly.

Danny looked at me. "What makes you say that?"

I almost quipped that it was feminine intuition but I was afraid it might really be that. "I don't know. It just seems that maybe these shades exist only here in Ovid. And I have no idea where Ovid exists."

"I know what you mean," he agreed. "I've never heard of Ovid, and I wouldn't be surprised to find out that it doesn't show up on any map either. What sort of beings would have the ability to create something like Ovid and then alter us to live in it?"

"Gods," I said simply.

"Gods?" Danny repeated. "You mean God?"

"Don't go religious on me," I told Danny as we pulled into the school parking lot. "I mean beings with godlike powers. Up until today, I didn't believe anything like Ovid was even possible. Now, we have to grant that magic exists, but this seems to be a bit beyond the capabilities of traditional wizards from out of folklore. I'd say the Judge and his minions like Officer Mercer are some kind of gods."

"You mean like the old Greek or Norse gods?"

"Maybe," I replied. "You know, I was a history major. I do recall that there was a Roman poet named Ovid. The Roman gods came from the Greek gods—or at least a number of them did. Maybe they really existed."

"That sounds sacrilegious," Danny cautioned. I suddenly remembered that as Larry he had been raised in a strict religious family.

Part 5

"I don't mean it that way," I assured him. "An author once said that science sufficiently advanced would be viewed by others as magic. Taking that one step further, if we allow that magic exists—and I think we have to now—we might conclude that wielders of very powerful

magic are gods.”

“So you don’t mean they’re really gods,” he concluded. I let him think that if it made him feel better. By my definition, the Judge and his followers were gods of one sort or another. If they look like gods and act like gods and change your sex like gods, they must be gods.

Ovid High School had a nice little football stadium. It was built out of flint stone, a popular building material in parts of the Midwest. A soft, tan-colored stone, it made a very attractive little stadium. There was even a bronze plaque attached to it that indicated it had been built by the WPA in the thirties. I doubted it, though. I didn’t think there had been an Ovid in the thirties. I was certain Ovid had been built for the benefit of its transformed residents, and since other than my teammates, there seemed to be very few of those around, I suspected that Ovid had been created quite recently—but for what purpose? Why were we being changed in this way, our real lives destroyed and these artificial ones created for us?

I had to put those thoughts aside and concentrate on being Samantha Wallace, I realized as we entered the stadium. Cries of “Hi, Danny” and “Hi, Sam,” were demanding our attention. We had to pretend to be what we had been changed into—namely two high school students on a date. Well, not exactly a date. I mean, we could have just been two friends out doing something together. Larry and I used to do that all the time.

But Danny wasn’t Larry and I wasn’t Jace, I realized as we sat down together with Jessica and Jack and some other couples. We weren’t being seen by others as just two friends going to the game together. As far as the rest of our ‘friends’ were concerned, we were a couple.

In fact, the only other person in our section who I knew realized she had been changed was Darla Hastings, formerly Austin Blake. She was sitting with a guy I assumed was one of our old teammates, but whoever he had been, he seemed to not realize he had ever been anyone else. He kept putting his arm around Darla, much to her discomfort. I felt very sorry for her. At least Danny knew who he had been and kept his distance from me.

There was no sign of the attractive blonde who had been Darren McDougal. I wasn't surprised. Whatever her name was now, she was fighting her new sex with everything she had. I wished she'd chill out a little bit. If it turned out that we were stuck with these new lives, she was letting herself in for a lot of misery.

Just by listening to the conversation around me, I realized there was at least one other person in the stands who remembered her previous life. Bert Hazleton, who had become Teresa Gonzales, was seated about six rows from us, closer to the team. Someone pointed out that all of the group of girls she was sitting with were dating football players. A few girls would come up and speak to that group, but boys in the stands knew to stay away. They were all spoken for. Teresa was carrying on an animated conversation with an attractive black girl. I didn't know who she was, but I suspected that like us, she remembered her previous life.

Danny pointed out the player who had been Wild Bill Moreland. He was now Glen MacReady, one of our quarterbacks. He even wore a number eight jersey just like he had back in college. The lucky bastard. As I watched the pre-game warm-ups on the field, I began to realize that maybe Wild Bill wasn't so lucky after all. He lacked the throwing arm he had once possessed, throwing such wobbly passes that I heard Jack mutter to no one in particular, "Damned if MacReady doesn't throw like a girl."

Throw like a girl? Come to think of it, he did throw a little like a girl. I could remember when I was younger how my older sister would always want to toss the football around with us. We always told her she threw like a girl, and the way she threw was very much like the former Wild Bill threw. No, the former Wild Bill Moreland would never realize his dream of professional football in the body of Glen MacReady. In fact, he'd probably never even have the chance to play college football. For an insensitive jock like Wild Bill, maybe that was a greater hardship than being changed into a girl.

It was easy to see who the star quarterback of Ovid High was. His number was seven—just like John Elway. And as luck would have it, he

even threw like a young John Elway, effortlessly hurling the ball in the air more than fifty yards with uncanny accuracy.

“James is right on target tonight,” one of the boys said to murmurs of agreement. So that was his name, eh? He was real, too, so one of our teammates had possibly come out of this orgy of transformation with the grand prize. I envied him whoever he had been. I only hoped it was one of the guys I liked. Maybe somebody like Dusty Stephenson, the big, likeable lineman, had finally gotten a chance to be the hero.

For a little while, I was able to forget the new body that was under my clothes. I was watching football. Becoming a girl had not lessened my interest in the game one little bit. And why should it? I realized. I knew a lot of girls who enjoyed football. Some could even play a pretty good game of touch football.

I had thought perhaps that the game would be a sham with a shade team brought in. Apparently, it was a real team, though, from a fairly large school in a suburb of Tulsa. Ovid’s magic was probably at work again, I thought. The small crowd across the field rooting for the visitors looked a little strange, sitting more passively for most of the game than the action would seem to demand.

And there was plenty of action. The opposing team in their red and silver uniforms were not passive like their fans. Their team played hard and played well. While our quarterback, who I now knew was named George James, played extremely well, our opponent’s quarterback was nearly as good, and their running game was actually a little better.

Both defenses fought hard as well, making the offense earn every yard. The game seesawed throughout the first half, and when the whistle blew signalling halftime, Ovid was ahead by a field goal, clinging tenaciously to a 17-14 lead.

I found myself enthralled by the game. It was almost exciting enough to make me forget what had happened to me. Then, I would be reminded as I yelled in support of our team and heard my sweet feminine voice. Or when I jumped to my feet in excitement, feeling the

sway of my breasts and the bounce of my long hair. And suddenly, it was halftime, and I would have to play my new role once again.

In many ways, halftime was very much like halftime at high school football games all over the country. While announcements were made over the PA system and the school marching band played stirring renditions of tunes which were never meant to be marches, the crowd's attention turned from the field to the stands. Some mobbed the concession stands while others, like our group, took the opportunity to stand and talk. We were in the latter group, surrounded by our fellow students. Mostly, Danny and I just listened.

As the focus of the conversation drifted away from us, we found ourselves on the fringes of the group. It was then that I felt a soft hand touch my own. I turned to see Teresa standing there with the attractive black girl she had been talking with during the game.

"Guys," she said softly so that only Danny and I would hear, "meet Geena Johnson. Of course, you supposedly already know her."

Danny and I both fought impulses to shake hands with the new girl. She was about my height, with long gently curling hair, and a soft brown complexion of coffee and cream. She looked athletic without losing an ounce of femininity. I noted that both Geena and Teresa were dressed in outfits similar to my own.

"She used to be Dusty Stephenson," Teresa explained.

I was momentarily speechless. No transformation I had yet seen was as surprising as this one. Dusty had been changed from a big, hulking white farm boy with all the grace of a drunken bull into a svelte, graceful black girl. She smiled at me with amusement. "You've... you've changed," I managed stupidly.

"So have you," she replied with a grin, showing perfect white teeth.

"I've been talking with Geena during the game," Teresa explained. "It seems she has the same problem I do—a football playing boyfriend. And you know possessive those guys can be." She gave us a little grin almost as good as Geena's.

“We got it all worked out, though,” Geena told us. “If they get too fresh, we’ll hit ‘em where it hurts.”

“And we know where that is,” Teresa added with a smile.

I didn’t envy the players these two were ‘dating.’ Real or shade, they were in for more than they’d bargained for. Teresa had been frightened that afternoon, almost to the point of hysteria. Now, though, she was ready to joke about it. When she had discovered Geena had the same problem, she was able to cope. In numbers there is strength, even if the number is only two. The two left us laughing and giggling as if they had been friends—female friends—for years.

Maybe that was why I had found it fairly easy to cope. Although Larry had remained male, both of us had been uprooted from our old lives and both of us had been good friends before. As Danny, I still considered Larry a friend, although obviously our relationship would be a little different. Others saw us as a couple. Just how different was brought home to me in the next few minutes.

“Is there something wrong between you and Danny?” Jessica asked when she had me alone for a minute.

Had we done something out of character? I wondered. “No, why?”

She hesitated before replying, “Oh, I don’t know. It’s just that you two seem... distant. You’ve been going together since summer, but you just don’t seem... well, you know. You don’t... snuggle.”

Snuggle!

“I mean,” she went on in reaction to the look that must have been on my face, “you don’t hold hands or put your arm around him or anything. Jack noticed, too.”

How I longed to tell her that only hours before, she and Jack would have gagged at the idea of ‘snuggling’ since they had both been guys. Unfortunately, I knew that she would look at me as if I had lost my mind. Maybe I had. Maybe this was some sort of a weird pizza-and-beer-induced nightmare. I wish, I thought. No, it was very real.

“Look,” I tried to explain, “Danny and I are fine. We’re... you know,

friends.”

“Sure,” she said with an impish grin. “Close friends.”

It was no use. Besides, our conversation was cut off as the teams came back onto the field to the cheers of the Ovid crowd.

Danny leaned over to me and said softly, “Jack thinks there’s something wrong because we aren’t... close together.”

“I know,” I sighed. “Jessica said the same thing.”

“Maybe we should...” his voice trailed off.

We had to maintain our roles, at least until we could find a way—if any—of returning to our original selves. Besides, I realized, with Danny as my boyfriend, I was safe from other guys. I wouldn’t have to face the problems Teresa and Geena were facing with guys claiming them who had no idea they were staking out former men. In reply to Danny, I shifted closer to him and allowed him to gently put his arm around me.

‘There, everyone,’ I thought to myself, ‘are you happy now? Don’t Danny and I look like just another couple? See? There was nothing to worry about. It’s just Danny and me, as happy as can be. Now, leave us alone.’ Of course, I didn’t say that out loud.

As I started to get back into the game, a strange thought passed through my head. It actually made me feel a little safer to have Danny’s arm wrapped around me. It was as if he was protecting me from the world. Did I need his protection? Probably not. It wasn’t the middle ages, and even though I was a girl, I should have felt quite safe in a small town like Ovid without Danny. But for some reason, it just felt right for us to be sitting together like that.

My mind returned to the game. Ovid managed to hold on to its slim lead until the beginning of the fourth quarter when a runner for the visiting team managed to squeak through a hole in our line, stutter-step his way past the secondary, and stroll into the end zone after a forty yard sprint. The crowd groaned loudly, but across the way, the visiting fans just sat emotionless as their team took the lead. No one but me seemed to notice.

The rest of the game was a nail biter. Ovid managed a drive to the middle of the field, but the drive stalled out, forcing us to punt. The visitors came right back, their own drive stalling at our forty yard line. Danny and I were as excited as we would have been had we been suited up for the game.

Then, Ovid got the ball back with two minutes left. Our quarterback was brilliant in the two-minute drill. He confidently marched the team down the field, taking advantage of short passes under the coverage whenever he could, and running once for a gain of twenty-five yards, scrambling off the turf to call our last time out.

There was only time for one more play, and all Ovid fans were on their feet. The ball was still at the thirty-yard line. It had to be a pass. Whoever George had been before, he was our last hope now. Danny hugged me tightly, as if I was some sort of good luck charm.

The visitors knew it had to be a pass, so they called a blitz, then backed away into coverage. It fooled our offensive line, allowing one of their defenders to scramble almost untouched into the backfield. George scrambled himself, evading the defender while never taking his eyes off the potential receivers down the field. There was no time left on the clock when he let the ball fly.

The ball arced through the air as if on a wire, threading the needle between two defenders who nearly collided trying to snag the ball. The hands that finally wrapped around the ball were extended from a black and gold Ovid jersey. With no time left, Ovid had won the game.

The Ovid crowd erupted in joy. Our section was jumping up and down, and I suddenly found myself hugging Danny tightly while he hugged me back. We were yelling joyfully into each other's face, our eyes locked as our lips nearly touched. We each issued a gasp and broke our hold on each other at once. It was just the excitement of the moment, I told myself as I looked away. I let Jessica give me a sisterly hug and tried to stop my heart from pounding so loudly. It was just an accident, I rationalized. I didn't mean to come so close to him, and he didn't mean to come so close to me. Yes, just an accident.

We didn't speak to each other as we drove the streets of Ovid after the game. At halftime, Jack and Jessica had pestered Danny at me into meeting them at an after-game party at the local Ovid Club. Danny let himself go on automatic to drive to the Ovid Club, so he was busily humming a tune to keep his mind off his driving. Normally, we might have talked, but I think we were afraid to say anything to each other. That would require each of us to look into the other's face, reminding of us of what had almost happened at the game.

Danny didn't lay a hand on me on the way back to the car, which was fine with me. So okay, people might talk, wondering if we were mad at each other. We weren't, though, I realized. We weren't angry at all; we were frightened. Or at least I was. I had nearly crushed my lips to his and kissed him. In fact, a wave of something akin to disappointment had rushed through my body when I didn't. I thought I saw the same disappointment in Danny's eyes.

"We made it," Danny said, pulling the car into a parking lot next to a painted cinder block building. I supposed it was like an Elk's Club in most American small towns. It looked like one anyway. We got out of the car and quietly walked in together.

A party was already under way. Black and gold paper streamers and balloons decorated the large party room. As we walked in, several of our high school 'friends' rushed over to us, gushing with excitement left over from the game. I had attended many parties like this one before. Where I had come from, a local Elk's Club would sponsor the party. It was a good way to let high school kids blow off a little steam after the game without getting into trouble.

In other words, the party was chaperoned, the punch was non-alcoholic, the music was popular but no metal, and the lights were kept just high enough that there were no dark corners for a couple to disappear into. It was strictly the PG-rated party. Still, when I had been in high school, after-game parties had been fun. Of course, then I had been one of the conquering heroes, a game standout then, enjoying the accolades of my friends. That honor was now reserved for others.

The hero of the game, our quarterback, came in moments after we

did. A cheer went up as George James entered the room, flanked by some of the other players. While he seemed to enjoy the praise, I noticed something about him that only someone who had been accustomed to such accolades himself might have noticed. Namely, George seemed a little surprised by it all, as if he had never had it happen to him before. He must remember who he was, I thought, but who could he have been? All of the players on our Bearcat team had to have experienced something like this before, I thought.

My eyes met George's then, and at once we seemed to realize that we were kindred spirits. He gave me a little smile which I returned. No one else seemed to notice. Even Danny had been distracted by Jack and failed to notice. Wordlessly, George and I drifted away from the crowd to a reasonably private place.

"Nice game, George," I told him with a smile.

He grinned. "Thanks, but that isn't what you wanted to talk about, is it?"

I shook my head. But what if I was wrong? What if I had misread the look. Oh my god, I thought. What if he thought I was hot for him? I had to dive right in. If he didn't remember, the worst that would happen would be that he would think I was a ditz. "You remember, don't you?"

He looked relieved as he nodded. "Yes, and so do you."

"You were great out there tonight," I went on. "Were you one of our quarterbacks?"

He chuckled, "Not quite. I was the Team Manager."

"J... Jill?" I gasped.

"None other."

"But you're a guy," I blurted out. Now how stupid was that? I thought to myself. If the powers of Ovid could change me from a six-three defensive end into an attractive young girl, why couldn't they change an attractive young girl into a starting quarterback? Besides, Jill had always been able to throw the ball pretty well—for a girl.

“And you’re not,” she—he—countered. There was a sly grin on his face.

“Well, you got me there,” I conceded. “I was Jace Stromberg.”

George looked suddenly stricken. Jill and I had been good friends.

“Jace, I’m sorry,” he said. “Somebody told me you had been Don Moore.” Don Moore had been one of Wild Bill’s good friends. Jill had never liked him.

“I don’t know who Don is now,” I told him. I then briefly went through the new identities I was aware of.

George nodded solemnly. He then updated me on a couple of transformations I wasn’t aware of. “But they don’t remember who they were,” he concluded. “As luck would have it, the only one who remembers who I’ve talked to before you is Wild Bill. As you know, he’s Glen McReady.”

“I know,” I replied, practically giggling as I told him about the comment in the stands about Glen “throwing like a girl.”

George chuckled. “It’s true, he does. Apparently the way the story goes is that Glen’s father was a hotshot quarterback for Ovid back in the seventies. Of course, I don’t think Ovid was even here in the seventies. Then his brother was a quarterback who graduated a couple of years ago—or so the story goes. The coach had high hopes for Glen, but nothing came of it. Rumor is he’ll be dropped from the team next year.”

“He must be devastated,” I said.

George nodded. “He is. Believe me, Jace—sorry, Sam. You got a better deal than he did.”

I sighed, “I’m not so sure about that, George. I don’t think I’m cut out to be a girl.” I didn’t say it out loud, but I wondered what justice there was in Ovid that had turned Jill into a guy and me into a girl. It didn’t seem right. Why not make me the quarterback and Jill the attractive girl?

“Oh, I don’t know,” George said, eyeing me appreciatively. “You could stand a little more jewelry, but you look good. How did you manage

with the makeup? It looks great on you. I always liked that shade of lipstick.”

It’s a good thing we weren’t being overheard. Most of the teens in the room would have been very upset to hear their star quarterback discussing jewelry and shades of lipstick. I told him about running on automatic which he hadn’t tried yet—at least not consciously. The way he evaded defenders during the game had to be part of the magic. Then it was time to change the subject.

“George, you said you didn’t think Ovid had been here since the seventies. Why?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s masculine intuition, huh? Seriously, though, the town just seems too new. I mean, even the old buildings don’t show that much wear. It’s almost like a town on a movie lot. Besides, except for our team, there don’t seem to be very many real people here. Most of them seem sort of transparent.”

“Yes, they’re called shades,” I told him.

George thought about that. “Shades, huh? Well, that sounds appropriate. Weren’t shades the spirits of the dead in Greek mythology?”

“Something like that,” I agreed.

Our conversation ended there. Danny had reappeared with a glass of punch for me, and while I had turned to take it from him, several of George’s teammates came up to drag him away. It was a shame. I had wanted to talk to George some more. He seemed to be coping fine, but of course, he had gotten to become male. As far as I was concerned, he had been promoted while I had been demoted.

Danny and I spent the remainder of the evening circulating and talking, just trying to learn whatever we could to help get us through our new lives. We were trying to blend in as much as possible. That didn’t extend to dancing, though. It seemed so odd to watch our former teammates, once male to the nth degree, now dancing as couples, embracing each other on the slow numbers in a ballet of teen

love. It made me more than a little uncomfortable. Would I ever be dancing like that with someone like Danny? God, I hoped not.

But what if this was permanent, and it most likely was, I realized. I couldn't deny this new body forever. Already I felt myself stirring at Danny's touch. I had nearly kissed him less than a day after we had both been young men. I remembered being a teenaged boy, feeling the awakening of sexual energy in my body. It was intense. Now, I had been reduced in age and made female, and those same teen stirrings—or rather their female equivalents—had to be affecting my body. Would I become attracted to men? Somehow, although not yet a natural idea, it already seemed less repugnant than it would have only hours before.

I did a little mental experiment as Danny and I stood there silently watching the couples dance. I saw Jessica out on the dance floor, her arms wrapped possessively around Jack's neck. As Jace, I would have found Jessica very attractive with her long brown hair, blue eyes, and ample breasts. I might have even made a move on her. So as my experiment, I tried to imagine what it would be like to make a move on Jessica now. Let's say it was just the two of us, alone in my room... No, it just didn't work. As attractive as she was, she just didn't get the juices flowing. I never really like to watch girl-on-girl sex that much, and now that I was one, participating in it didn't seem much better.

Then, on a whim, I looked not at Jessica but at Jack. Did he do anything for me? Jack was as tall as I used to be. His face was thin, framed by light blond hair cut fairly short. He was a nice guy if a little on the gawky side. Did he do anything for me? I was relieved to note that he did not.

'How about Danny, though?' a little voice in my mind asked. I tried to ignore it, but it was persistent. At last, I cast a sidelong look at Danny. He was busy watching the dancers, so I was able to look at him without his notice. As Larry, I suppose he was a decent-looking guy. I had never been able to tell if another guy was good-looking or not. Now though, as Danny, I could see that he had become a very... handsome young man. 'Yes, he could be Brad Pitt's long-lost younger

brother,' I thought. But was I attracted to him? I didn't think so, but the unsettling thing was that I wasn't sure. Something stirred when I looked at him.

Suddenly, he turned to me. I quickly looked back at the dancers, hoping he hadn't noticed the way I had been staring at him.

"I don't see Jennifer and Barry here," he commented.

Who in hell were Jennifer and Barry? Had something happened to Danny? Had he become like most of our teammates, lost in the world of Ovid?

"Who are Jennifer and Barry?" I asked cautiously.

He looked startled. "Oh, sorry. I was talking with Wild Bill—Glen now. He told me the blonde Darren became is Jennifer Tilton. She's the daughter of a bank president here in Ovid. She really fell into high society in Ovid."

Yes, but she had to be a girl to do it, I thought. It was obvious she would have preferred being in a poor family living in a packing crate if she could have kept her balls.

"And Dennis Mahoney is now Barry Hartman."

"Isn't Hartman the starting halfback for Ovid?" I asked.

Danny nodded. "One and the same."

Why was it Dennis got to remain male and play football and I didn't? I was starting to feel victimized. Then I realized I wasn't alone. Dusty, Horace, Bert and Austin had all been male, but no more. And what of all my other teammates? At least half of them were as female as I was. No, I had to put all thoughts of feeling sorry for myself away. Such thoughts would accomplish nothing.

Part 6

Danny and I had spent most of the party talking to others and had spent very little time together. Maybe it was my imagination, but I suspected Danny was as uncomfortable being around me as I was being around him. We had been thrust into the role of a dating couple,

and there were some real pitfalls to that. It might have been easier if we had barely known each other. If, say Austin Blake had been turned into Danny, it might have been easier for me, I thought. I knew very little about Austin, so it wouldn't be as difficult as it was with Larry. Larry and I had roomed together, played football together, caroused together, and spilled out guts to each other. But we had both been male then. Now, I was a girl, and a girl who had done all the things with a guy that I had done with Larry would be close, indeed.

As the party began to wind down, I asked Danny to take me home. He had really gotten in to the party. Although no longer a football hero, he found out he was one of the more popular guys in the class. I think he was actually enjoying it, but I wasn't. I was tired, and the makeup on my face felt like it had been there a month. Also, my tight jeans were rubbing where I didn't want them to rub, and even though I was lucky enough to not have to wear heels like a few of the girls had, my feet hurt in those flimsy flats. A tired scowl got his attention. Moments later, we were on our way to my house. Again, we didn't say a lot to each other.

When Danny dropped me off at my house, "Well, good night," was all he managed to say.

"Good night," I returned softly, climbing out of the car before an uncomfortable moment got any worse. He waited until I had the door to my new home open before driving away. He would never have done that before. There wouldn't have been any reason to do so. But now, he had to treat me like a girl. I was surprised he hadn't tried to kiss me good night. Then, I was surprised at being a little disappointed that he hadn't tried.

My parents were in bed already, so I managed to get ready for bed in silence. Wrapped up in my thoughts, it was essentially automatic, which was just as well since I would probably have botched removing my makeup. I only took over long enough to find some pajamas instead of a nightie. Even the pajamas were feminine, but at least not as frilly as a nightie.

My thoughts were still on Danny. I would have to call him on Saturday

and talk this out with him. I needed him. No, not that way. I mean, I needed him as a friend. He could help me through this mess since he knew me best of all my teammates. Also, as uncomfortable as I was being a girl around him, I knew it would be worse if I was a girl without a steady boyfriend. Every unattached guy in my class would be angling for a date with me. We had to find some level to deal with each other that we could both be comfortable with.

I still had some hope that Coach Jessup would be able to figure something out. Darren—or rather Jennifer, whether she liked it or not—had said Coach Jessup was trying to organize something. Maybe we could all go to the Judge and ask to be changed back. If all of us went together, maybe we could reason with him. It was at least a thread of hope, I thought as I began to drift off to sleep.

I awoke the next morning to the ringing of a phone. I had slept so soundly that it took me a moment to figure out where I was—or who I was for that matter. I grabbed the phone without thinking, muttering something which I hoped sounded like “hello.” I was surprised to hear my feminine voice.

“Hi, Sam, it’s Jessica,” the voice on the phone said cheerfully. “So are we going shopping today or what?”

Three questions tumbled through my befuddled brain: ‘Who was Sam?’ ‘Why would I want to go shopping?’ and ‘How could anybody be that cheerful in the morning?’ Then the answer to the first question lodged in my brain: I was Sam. It had been real and not a dream. I was really a fifteen year old girl now. As for the second question, I guess I was expected to like shopping because I was a girl now. As for the third question, I guess Jessica was just that cheerful because the powers of Ovid had made her so.

I sighed, “I don’t know, Jessica. I’ve got a lot of homework to do.” Actually, that was true. I had looked in my assignments notebook while still at school and had noticed that Sam had a history test coming up on Tuesday and a paper due in English on Wednesday. Plus I needed to review algebra since it had been several years since I had really taken an algebra course.

“Oh, come on,” she wheedled. “Trina and Kelly and Darla are all going. My mom is going to drive.”

Except for Darla, none of the names had any meaning for me, but apparently, they were supposed to be friends of mine. Well, why not? I thought. I really never liked to shop as a guy, but I knew a lot of girls who did. I supposed it would be instructive since Jessica thought she had always been a girl. I could learn from a pro. “Oh, all right,” I finally agreed, “but just for a little while.”

“Great! We’ll be there to pick you up at ten. We’re all wearing skirts so we can try stuff on.”

“Wait!” I called. “What time is it now?”

“Eight thirty, silly.” There was a click in my ear as she hung up. Well, that gave me an hour and a half to get ready and eat breakfast. No problem.

I showered and dressed quickly. Jessica had suggested a skirt, so I abided by her suggestion. It was actually a little more comfortable than the tight jeans anyway. It looked like a warm day, so I chose a khaki skirt and a dark-blue knit top. Sneakers with low cut crew socks seemed appropriate, and just because I was wearing a skirt, I saw no reason to wear pantyhose if I could avoid it. I made it to the breakfast table with time to spare.

My new mother was seated at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee in her hand as she read the morning Tulsa paper. “Have fun last night, dear?”

Oh sure, I thought, pouring myself a glass of orange juice. I spent the whole evening in a tight pair of jeans while my former best friend had his arm around me and nearly kissed me. Such fun. “Yeah, it was fun,” I said without enthusiasm.

‘Mom’ frowned but said nothing more about it. “So are you still going shopping with the girls today?”

“Yes,” I replied, sipping my juice while I peeked at the front page of mom’s paper. There was no mention of a missing football team, but I

hadn't really expected to see one. It was as if the reality we had known had somehow been shifted, and the people we had been no longer existed. I could have confirmed this by calling my real family, but to be honest, I was afraid of what I would hear from them. Maybe I would try later, though.

"Oh, Danny called while you were in the shower."

"Oh?" Why was there a sudden sinking feeling in my stomach?

"He wants you to call him back."

"Okay," I said slowly as I checked the pantry until I found some Pop Tarts to munch on.

My new mother sighed. "Honey, is there something wrong between you and Danny?"

I looked at her, a little surprised. "What do you mean?" What I really meant was how can you tell?

"It's just that you and Danny have been so close since last summer," she explained. "You're always saying 'Danny said this' and 'Danny did that.' I guess I thought Danny was someone special, that's all."

"We're just friends," I replied, looking down at the newspaper again so I wouldn't have to look her in the eye. My face felt flushed, too. I hope I wasn't turning so red that she would notice.

"Well, I know you're friends," she agreed. "A girl your age isn't really old enough to get all that serious about a boy, but you seemed to like Danny so much."

"I do like him," I blurted out. "He's a friend. Can't we just be friends? I mean, why does everybody have to make such a big deal of it?" My eyes felt warm and moist. Was I starting to cry? That was too much. I was starting to cry over something as stupid as... as stupid as... Impulsively, I jumped up from the table and rushed upstairs.

I looked in the mirror in the bathroom. It wasn't too bad. There was a little redness around my eyes, and my mascara needed minor repairs. It was still fifteen minutes until Jessica picked me up, so I had a few

minutes to fix the damage. I didn't even really need to go on automatic. It wasn't that hard. I didn't see my mother come up behind me.

"Are you okay?" she asked, causing me to actually jump a little.

"Yes, I'm fine," I managed.

"Samantha, Danny didn't do anything to upset you, did he?"

It was a question I should have asked myself. The fact of the matter was that Danny had really done nothing out of sorts. Like me, he was just trying to play a role. The problem was that our roles now involved an element neither of us would have considered even possible a day before. Here we were, two fast friends, suddenly thrust into a relationship neither of us had asked for. No, Danny had done nothing to upset me. It was me who had upset me. I didn't know how to be a girl in a relationship like the one everyone expected of us, so instead of facing up to it, I had fled. It wasn't really very smart of me.

"Well, did he?"

"No, mom," I replied. "I'm sorry. Look, Danny didn't do anything. I'm just a little... unsure," I replied, for lack of a better word.

She put her arm around me. Shade or not, she seemed solid enough.

"Look, honey, that's the way it is with boys."

"It... it is?" I asked, oddly comforted by her embrace.

"Sure," she said with a smile. "Look, you've never really dated all that much, and never as long as you've dated Danny. He seems like a wonderful boy, but the two of you are both a little new at this. Just take it slowly and see what happens. Just make sure you keep the relationship from getting out of hand—sexually, I mean."

"I would never let that happen!" I assured her, and I meant every word of it. The idea of somebody—anybody—getting in my pants was like something out of a nightmare. I would be a nun before I allowed that to happen—and I wasn't even Catholic! Or at least I never used to be. I wasn't sure what I was now.

I touched up my makeup as best I could while my new mother did her best to make sure I didn't have sex with Danny—or any other boy for that matter. I tried not to listen. The thought of having a guy stick his dick into me was about as repugnant as any thought I could think of. My sister back in the real world had once told me how young girls sit around at slumber parties, pooling their meagre knowledge on the act of sex. At first, they chorus “ew!” in disgust, but eventually, they reconcile themselves to the idea. Well sorry, but I couldn't see reconciling myself to doing that with a guy—ever.

Suddenly there was the honk of a horn in the driveway. “Gotta go,” I said, relieved that Jessica had arrived early so I could leave before I got more warnings on avoiding sex. I hoped my makeup looked all right. It would just have to do.

“Samantha, don't forget your purse!” my mother called out. Damn, it was going to be a pain remembering that all the time.

As Jace, I had ridden in cars driven by drunken teammates as we drifted along the roads of Northwest Missouri. But nothing had prepared me for riding down the streets of Ovid while the driver—a girl who had just turned sixteen—paid more attention to the distractions caused by other girls in the car than she did to the traffic on the roads. I thanked God that Ovid was a small town, and it only took about five minutes until we were parking in front of a three-story building whose sign declared it to be ‘March's Department Store.’ Well, I supposed since Ovid was probably too small for a mall; hanging around a department store on a Saturday was the next best thing.

We all piled out of the car and headed into the store. At least I knew Jessica and Darla. Trish and Kelly were new to me, though. Both were shades; Trish was a willowy brunette while Kelly had long blonde hair and a figure that although still developing at fifteen was well on its way to being voluptuous. I was happy to let Jessica lead the way since I had no idea how the store was laid out. Darla and I hung back while the other girls attacked the clothing racks like ants at a picnic.

Something was bothering Darla, I could tell. When we had been guys, we hadn't been very close. In fact, I barely knew Austin—yet here we

were, a new friendship being forged by a common magical experience. Of course, it wasn't surprising to see Darla be bothered. I was bothered, too. But I had misinterpreted what was upsetting Darla. She motioned me over to another rack of dresses and pretended to be looking at them, fingering them critically.

"What do you think of this?" she asked, pulling a short yellow dress with a small floral pattern on it.

"I think it's a dress," I said a little sardonically.

Darla got a little closer to me. "Sam, I've got a problem," she began in a low voice.

"I'm listening," I assured her, pretending to examine the rack of dresses next to hers. So what else was new? I thought. It seemed as if we all had a problem.

"I understand Coach Jessup is now Ms. Drew, the Social Sciences teacher."

"I've heard that, too," I agreed. I couldn't confirm it. I hadn't experienced any of my morning classes yet, so I hadn't even met the new Ms. Drew.

Darla sighed. "And I've heard Ms. Drew is trying to organize something that might get us changed back."

"Look, Darla," I began, "I wouldn't get my hopes up too much because..."

"I don't want to change back," she interrupted suddenly.

I turned to face her, shocked. She looked embarrassed, her face crimson. She was having difficulty looking me in the eye. "I don't want to be Austin again," she said softly. "I want to be Darla. I've... I've always wanted to be... like this."

"You're gay?" I asked, barely above a whisper. It couldn't be! I hadn't known Austin well, but he was a regular guy—a team player. Besides, I had seen him with his girlfriend before. They had been hanging all over each other.

A look approximating disgust crossed Darla's face. "You were always one of the smartest guys on the team," she mumbled. "I thought you'd understand. I said I always wanted to be a girl. I didn't say I was gay. I'm not gay."

"Look, Darla," I said, recovering, "I'm sorry if I offended you. I guess I just assumed..."

"That if I wanted to be a girl, I must be gay?" she finished for me.

"Well... yes."

She shook her head slowly. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. A lot of people would think that. No, I never wanted to make love to a man while I was male. I mean, not really. It's sort of confusing."

"I'm trying to understand," I assured her.

More sure of herself, she explained, "Think of how you feel right now. You probably feel like you're a man trapped in the body of a girl."

"Of course," I agreed. That was exactly how I felt.

"Well, I was just the opposite," she continued. "I always felt like I was a girl trapped in the body of a boy. It was like there had been some huge cosmic mistake. Or maybe it wasn't a mistake. Maybe it was God's sense of humor. Anyhow, there I was. As a child, I always envied the girls their lives. I wanted to be one of them—to wear what they wore and think what they thought. When I was about thirteen, I even slipped into my sister's room when she was away and tried on her clothes." She turned red again.

I put my hand on her arm and gave her a small smile. I was developing an odd respect for Darla. It had to be hard for her to be telling me all of this. And I was trying to understand. Sure, every guy wonders at some point or another what it must be like to be a girl. Of course, for most of us, it's a passing thought—just like we wonder what it must be like to be a fireman or Chinese or a fifty-year-old man. That wasn't where Darla was coming from, though.

Encouraged, she went on, "I guess I was never cut out to be a transvestite. At thirteen, I was already pretty good sized. I mean, I was

playing JV football by then. So I realized I was condemned to be male for the rest of my life. I did the best I could with it. The problem was I couldn't look at a lingerie ad without wishing I looked like that, and I couldn't make love to a girl without wondering what it felt like for her. Damn it, Sam, I was pretty fucked up.

"Then we came here. It was like a dream come true. One minute there I was, Austin Blake—a man who didn't want to be a man. Then, the next minute, I was Darla Hastings. I mean, I wasn't a real beauty like you or some of the others, but I was attractive. I think I would have settled for being unattractive just to be a girl, so this was more than I could have ever hoped for."

She stopped and looked at me seriously. "You don't hate me, do you, Sam?"

I felt a pang of emotion in my throat as I looked in her sad but hopeful eyes. How could I hate someone who just wanted to be happy with who they were? "No, I don't hate you, Darla."

She sighed. "I'm glad. Look, I'll help everybody try to get back to their old lives, but I want to stay here. I want to be Darla. If Coach Jessup is successful, I just want to be left behind."

"I understand," I told her. "But why not just opt out of anything we do to get changed back?"

"I want to support the team," she said seriously. "All of you guys have been like family to me the last couple of years. I wouldn't do anything to let you down. In fact, if it's all or nothing, I'd even change back with you."

I realized in that moment that this poor confused former guy standing in front of me in the body of a girl was one of the most self-sacrificing, heroic people I had ever known. If she had told any of us of her odd desire back before we had come to Ovid, she would have been ridiculed. She—then he—would never have lived it down. But Darla had proven herself the bravest of us all. We would think ourselves brave because we were willing to face the Judge as a group, demanding our old lives back. Darla would be there with us—not because she wanted

to be, but because it was what the team wanted.

“Don’t worry, Darla,” I told her, giving her a sisterly hug. “I’m sure it will all work out.”

I had surprised myself with that little hug. It wasn’t instinctive for me, but somehow, it just felt like the right thing to do. I think it made me feel as good as it made her feel.

She smiled at me with a tear in her eye. I only hoped that my promise wasn’t an empty one. If the Judge was powerful enough to change us as he had, what would he do when we crossed him?

The other girls had joined us by then, so I wasn’t able to talk with her about it further. I’m not sure what I would have said to her that hadn’t already been said anyway. As I looked at the dresses, I began to examine my own thoughts. Darla had told me to think of the problem from my own perspective. I was now man trapped in the body of a girl. In the topsy-turvy world of Ovid, our positions had been somewhat reversed. Darla was now the person she wanted to be, and it was me who was the oddball. I was now a man mentally trapped in the body of a girl. I could continue to act like a guy, but to what purpose? I would be subject to the same ridicule Austin would have experienced if the situation was reversed.

But how could I really act like a girl? Austin had acted like the guy he didn’t think he was. I was sure he had even made love in that form. Could I do that? Could I act like a girl? Oh, I didn’t mean just the little automatic things like applying makeup and getting dressed that the magic of Ovid seemed to be able to help me do. What I meant was, could I really think like a girl? And if I did that just to fit in, wasn’t there a danger that I might start to think like that for real?

“That would look very nice on you,” a melodic feminine voice said behind me.

I jumped, unaware that I was being observed. I had been fingering a silky dark green dress just to try to look like a shopper. I hadn’t really been looking at the dress, lost as I was deep in my own thoughts.

I turned to see perhaps the most beautiful woman I could ever have imagined. Her hair was the color of spun gold, styled mid length. Her skin was like alabaster, perfect and flawless. Her eyes were the deepest, prettiest blue I had ever seen and her figure seen through a rose-colored sheath dress was perfection itself. A small nametag tastefully identified her as Vera March.

“Oh, I’m... I’m just looking,” I told her. For once, I was almost happy I was a girl. If I had still been a guy, I think I would have been too tongue-tied to even talk to her.

She smiled and went on as if I hadn’t spoken. “This is the new style for fall. You’re very fortunate you have such attractive legs because the skirt is a little short. Why don’t you try it on over there?” She nodded in the direction of the fitting rooms where Jessica had just come from, dressed in a short white dress which she was showing to the other girls.

“Oh, I don’t think it’s for me,” I protested. I didn’t want to be on display for the other girls in this short little thing. “I’m really not into this sort of this.” Yeah, like being a girl.

“Just try it on,” Vera March insisted. Her voice was soft and sweet, but there was something in it that had force. I found myself taking it off the rack and heading for the fitting rooms without further protest.

I had to admit, it did feel good—unlike anything else I had ever had on my body. Maybe it was the soft, hairless skin I now possessed, but whatever the reason, it felt almost luxurious.

“Sam, come out! We all want to see it!” Jessica called from beyond the curtain. There was no mirror in the fitting room, and I had to admit I was a little curious as to what it did look like on me. Reluctantly, I stepped out of the fitting room and faced my friends.

As one, they oohed as they looked at me. It was actually Darla who finally blurted, “Oh Sam, that looks absolutely fabulous on you.”

“It’s a little short,” I muttered, feeling as if my butt was exposed.

“Oh, don’t be a prude, Sam,” Jessica giggled. “It looks great on you.

You should buy it.”

I think there must be a single moment in everyone’s life when he or she becomes aware of who they really are. For most of us, that comes when we’re so young that we don’t remember it. For me, though, it was that moment when I looked into the mirror and saw myself in that dark green dress. I had spent over twenty-one years being aware that I was a male, strong, not bad looking, intelligent, but most of all, male. Since the day before, that image had been confounded. I was still intelligent, but all of the other attributes had been altered. I was now weaker and very good-looking in a feminine sort of way. Somehow, though, I had been trying to deny that I was, in fact, female. Oh yes, I had no doubt that I had been thrust into the role of a young woman, but it was more like a role in a play. Deep down, I was still Jace Stromberg.

Now, though, as I looked into that mirror, aware of how that short green dress molded itself to the feminine curves of my body and accented the reddish highlights in my hair and the creamy smoothness of my skin, it was—for that moment at least—hard to imagine that I had ever been male. Were those green-gray eyes really mine? Were my breasts really that high and that form? Did my feminine hands actually look that graceful when smoothing down the dress?

I found myself wishing I had worn pantyhose after all. The short crew socks looked absurd when viewed with the dress, and heels—I needed heels. I...

“It’s beautiful on you.” It was the voice of Vera March as she stood behind me but out of my sight in the mirror. It was like a siren song, luring me into the depths of my new femininity.

But wasn’t there hope that I needn’t stay this way? If we all stuck together as a team, perhaps we could still convince the Judge to change us back. In numbers, there is strength. I could not give into this image. I was still Jason Stromberg—strong, intelligent and male. Yes, above all, I was male. I had to be male. This dress, as beautiful as it was on my curved body, was a white flag of surrender—surrender

to a life I didn't want. I must resist. I must resist.

"Shall we put it on your mother's account?"

I turned to Vera March. "What? Ye—no. No, I don't think so." Was that disappointment in her eyes? Or was it amusement?

There was a collective "aw!" from the other girls.

"You should get it," Darla urged sincerely. "With heels and the right jewelry, you'd look sensational."

"Don't remind me," I muttered, fleeing to the fitting room.

So while the other girls each bought something, I contented myself with pretending to look. Vera March made no further attempt to foist the dress off on me, for which I was grateful. Her persuasive tone, coupled with her unquestionable beauty, somehow made me want to accept what had happened to me. She was real, too, but perhaps not a transformee. No, she was like Officer Mercer and the Judge, poised and imbued with a magical essence that spoke of something beyond human understanding.

Yes, they were gods, I thought to myself as we walked down the main street of Ovid together. They had managed to change our football team into a collection of high school students, most of whom could not even remember who they had been. Here we were, our little group of five girls walking down the streets of Ovid, stopping to admire a pretty pair of shoes or a sexy dress in the windows we passed. Yet only three of us remembered that only a day before, we had been young men, fit and ready for a battle on the gridiron this very afternoon—a battle that would now never take place.

I had a sudden flash of inspiration. The Judge—Jupiter? Perhaps. Like the King of the Roman Gods, he wielded imperious power, creating a town and all its denizens from—what?—whatever was available. At his side, Officer Mercer, an officer of the court who seemed to be almost anywhere he needed to be—like Mercury? And Vera March, beautiful beyond imagining. Wasn't it Venus who fit that role in the stories of the Romans?

“Don’t you think so, Sam?”

It was Jessica’s voice. “What?” I responded.

Jessica sighed. “Honestly, Sam, you’ve been on another planet the last couple of days. I was asking you about the shoes.” She pointed at a pair of black pumps with a—what?—two-inch heel.

“Oh, yes, they’re nice,” I managed.

The other girls tittered—even Darla.

“I had just remarked that they would go great with that green dress you tried on,” she explained.

“Sure,” I agreed with a shrug. The funny thing is she was right. I found myself wondering what I would look like in the green dress I had tried on, with these pumps on my feet and... What was happening to me?

As we continued up Main Street, I knew what was happening to me. It was probably happening to all of us. When you’re forced to play a role, it becomes more and more who you are. Wake up some morning and find out you are a girl instead of a man and you’ll start acting like a girl just to fit in. The next thing you know, you’ll start thinking like a girl. What happens next? You’ll be a girl. Already, my life as Jace Stromberg was starting to feel like a life that had happened to someone else. It was hard to imagine what it felt like to block out tall, powerful receivers with my body. It was hard to remember what it felt like to be taller than most other people.

Part 7

Our next stop was a trip into the past—Porter’s Drug Store. It was the granddaddy of the modern Walgreen’s, a store with a pharmacy in back and rows of greeting cards, magazines, candy, gifts and other sundries packed tightly into limited display space. Unlike a modern Walgreen’s, though, Porter’s was equipped with a genuine soda fountain, complete with stools and a row of booths. It looked like something out of *Grease*. My new friends and I would not have looked out of place had we wandered in wearing Bobby socks, poodle skirts, and ponytails to the sounds of Elvis on a jukebox.

The five of us slid into a single booth. I was on the outside of the side with three girls, a feat that we could never have accomplished in our old bodies. Even with our expanded asses, we managed to fit reasonably well. Then, we deviated from the fifties atmosphere by ordering Diet Cokes instead of the sodas Porter's still offered.

I tried to keep my mind on the conversation, but it wasn't easy. The major topic of the day seemed to be the clothing we had all looked at, followed closely by boys and a party the following Saturday to celebrate Ovid's homecoming.

"Do you and Danny want to double with Jack and me?" Jessica asked.

There it was again. They all assumed that Danny and I were a couple. I wanted to scream out that Danny was not my boyfriend and I didn't care if I never saw him again—even if he was an old friend. I didn't, though. Instead, I gave a tepid "Sure" in response to her question. It was sufficient.

Darla seemed to be honestly enjoying the conversation. For her, this must have been heaven. At last, she had the body she had always wanted. She was animated and exuberant as she talked about the guy she was going to the homecoming dance with. As miserable as I felt for myself, I felt happy for her. At least some good had come out of our transformations.

I wondered if I would ever be anything like these other girls. Would I someday be avidly discussing shades of lipstick and agreeing that George James had great buns? Maybe, but it didn't seem likely.

"Speaking of George James," Kelly whispered as she looked over my shoulder, "it's a hunk alert."

The three of us sitting with our backs to the front of the store turned as one to see George walking toward us, flanked by Jack and Danny. A flurry of emotions coursed through me at that moment. I was at once envious of George. Why couldn't I have been turned into the high school starting quarterback? Why had Jill been chosen for that role? Then I became curious about Jack. What was it like to lose yourself so

completely into an entirely new identity? But most overwhelming were the feelings I had when I looked at Danny. He was—or had been—my best friend. I was envious of him as well—still male, self-assured, handsome. And there was the other emotion I was finding so difficult to contend with. He was handsome, and somehow I recognized that. When I saw him, my heart fluttered and I was drawn to him like a moth to a flame. There was no use in denying it. My body was attracted to his body. I knew it, and I knew I had to fight it.

The next thing I knew, they were standing next to us, each of them tall, good-looking, and exuding a masculine aura that I would never have noticed before my transformation. There was the usual social ritual that occurs when a group of girls and a group of guys meet. There were greetings followed by posturing. Each of the guys was anxious to show how cool he was. The odd thing was how George had picked up on it so quickly. Just a day before, he had been a girl himself. Yet here he was, chest out, stomach in, looking for all the world as if he had been a high school sports hero all his life.

Was I reacting as if I had been a girl forever? I didn't think so, but if I really thought about it, I was pretending to ignore the guys, stealing glances at them, looking a little flustered when they noticed, and even fighting back a giggle or two at something the guys said or did. True, I was the most reserved of the girls, but a casual observer wouldn't have noticed anything in my actions out of the ordinary. Somehow, that both bothered me and pleased me at the same time.

I tried hard to ignore Danny. After all, I had not answered his call that morning, and I had dreaded the next time I would have to face him. That time had happened much sooner than I had imagined. For what it was worth, he seemed a little uncomfortable, too.

As the conversation continued, Danny managed to catch my eye. He motioned nervously for me to join him. As I slid out of the booth to talk with him, I don't really think any of the rest of the group really noticed.

It was unfortunate that the location we picked to talk was so close to the cosmetics counter. Staring at a display of lipstick beside us, it was a reminder to me of what I had become. I used lipstick now, whether I

liked it or not. All of the cosmetics so prominently displayed were examples of what had been thrust upon me, so it was with some rancor that I snapped at Danny with, "What do you want?"

He was a little taken aback, but he stood his ground. "Look, Sam, I tried to call you this morning."

"I know."

"Did I do something wrong last night?"

Did he? Actually, he didn't. He was the proverbial perfect gentleman around me. True, he had put his arm around me, but not in a threatening way. And our lips had nearly met, but that had been as much my fault as his. "No," I said slowly, my voice less threatening.

"I thought we were friends," he pressed on.

"Well," I had to admit, "we are."

"Then as a friend," Danny continued, "let me help you out. This has got to be hard for you."

"You have no idea how hard," I sighed, fighting back a tear.

"No, I don't," he admitted. "I can't imagine what it must be like. Being Danny is weird enough."

"Oh, Lar—I mean Danny," I said, my voice suddenly quaking. I was afraid I couldn't hold it together much longer. What was happening to me?

"Hey, let's go outside," he suggested. "I'll walk you home."

Walk? Oh sure, I remembered. Ovid wasn't that big. We could walk practically anywhere if we had to. I thought I needed a walk. I needed to... to...think.

Danny waved at the others who all gave him a knowing nod. They had all seen scenes like this before and realized that a boy and a girl needed time alone to work out their relationship. Of course, that wasn't what was really happening here. Or was it? Come to think of it, that was exactly what was happening. Danny and I had a relationship,

even if it wasn't the relationship everyone else thought it was. And we did need to work it out.

It was a warm Saturday morning, and I actually felt better as we got out of the business district and walked together down streets lined with stately oaks whose leaves were starting to reach the height of their fall colors. It reminded me of home. I missed my family there in that moment. I remembered what things had been like back when Joan was the age I was now and I was in the eighth grade. Johnny was still in elementary school. We had been a happy family then since it was before mom and dad started arguing all the time.

I felt a need to call them; I knew I wouldn't, though. I was pretty sure they wouldn't remember me. Whatever power had changed me had probably erased all trace of Jace Stromberg. How did I know that? Well, when the morning paper had said nothing about our disappearance, I was pretty sure the Judge had wiped out all trace of our existence.

The question was: could we convince him to change us back? What incentive did he have to do so? For some reason, he wanted us this way.

"You look like you're lost in thought," Danny observed.

"I suppose I am," I replied. I told him my theories about the Judge.

"I suspect you're right," he agreed as we walked slowly. "I had reached pretty much the same conclusions. And by the way, there's a Ms. Miner who's Superintendent of Schools in Ovid. She's probably Minerva."

"I wonder how many of the old gods are really in Ovid," I said. "If we try to fight them, the odds could be heavily against us."

Danny shook his head. "I don't think we should fight them."

"That's easy for you to say," I pointed out. "You're still male. Besides, you're a good looking guy. The girls will be falling all over you when they figure out we're not an item. And you've got a good family and you're bright. Things are coming up roses for you."

“And you,” he pointed out.

“Me?” I laughed at him. “Haven’t you noticed? I’m a girl! I can’t exactly play football anymore and chasing girls is sort of out of the question.”

“So that’s what’s bothering you,” Danny said softly.

“Of course it’s bothering me! Did you think I want to run around in skirts and heels for the rest of my life? To wear makeup and have my hair done? To have periods and babies? God, Danny, what did you think? That I wanted to be a girl?”

We had stopped and were facing each other. I was practically yelling at him, and I could feel my face flushing as my voice got louder. I expected him to yell back at me. I wanted him to yell back at me. I wanted him to tell me I had turned into a stupid bitch who would have to learn to like being a girl and that he was just the guy to show her why. In other words, I wanted him to be such a prick that I would be justified in walking away. I wanted him to say all the things a stupid prick would say. But he didn’t.

Danny looked me in the eye, a sad expression on his face. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. This has to be very hard on you.”

“Well it is!” I snapped, but I was having difficulty maintaining my anger. Why did he have to be so understanding? Why did he have to be so nice? Why did he have to be so... be so... handsome?

“Look, Sam,” he began softly, “I don’t pretend to have any idea what you’re going through, but you’re right. For me, I’m just looking at living my old life over again. I guess I don’t play football in this reality, but that was probably a dead end for me anyway. Now, I can concentrate on other things and get on with my life. Who knows? Maybe I’ll win a scholastic scholarship this time instead of an athletic one.

“But for you, everything has changed. I can’t even begin to imagine what it must be like to have a... I mean, to be a girl. But I want to help you any way I can.”

“Help me, sure,” I snorted. “I suppose you want to show me how to use all that new equipment of mine.”

“God damn it, Sam!” Danny raised his voice, startling me. “The Jace Stromberg I knew didn’t sit around wallowing in self pity. No, I don’t want to help you use that new equipment of yours.” He was silent for a moment, then continued, “No, that’s not true. You’ve become a very good looking girl—the kind of girl Larry Gunn would have been all over.”

I felt an odd mixture of emotions. Part of me wanted to punch him out for that remark, but part of me was strangely interested in what he had to say.

“But you’re my friend—probably my best friend—and I couldn’t... wouldn’t... do that to you,” he said softly. “Sam, I want us to be friends. I know that won’t be easy. Practically everyone thinks you and I are a couple. I know we aren’t. We’re friends, or at least we should be.”

I suddenly remembered the old movie *When Harry Met Sally*. It had explored the concept of friendship between men and women. In it, the main characters had managed to become friends, I thought brightly. Then I remembered that they had ended up in bed together.

But I needed a friend. I needed for Danny to be my friend. “Okay,” I murmured. “Friends.”

He brightened, and I added, “But just friends.”

“Just friends,” he repeated, smiling.

We were silent for a moment, until I asked, “So okay, ‘friend,’ what do we do next?”

He grinned. “Well, I walk you home and we wait until Monday to see if Coach Jessup is able to organize anything.”

“What do you think, Danny?” I asked.

“About what?”

“About Coach Jessup,” I said. “I keep hearing he—or I guess it’s she now—is going to try to organize some way to get us changed back. Do you think she can do it?”

Danny thought carefully before responding. "No, I don't. Not really."

I felt the same way, but I was disappointed when I heard Danny say it.

"I'm sorry, Sam," he went on. "I hope I'm wrong and that he can figure out something. But we can't even figure out why these gods have done this to us. I mean, if the old classical gods have some reason for creating this town and changing us all into permanent residents, I don't think they're going to change us back just because we don't like it. The Greeks may have come up with democracy, but I don't think the Judge and his folks buy into it."

"I feel the same way," I sighed. "I guess that's why this is so hard for me. If I could have been transformed into this form for a day or two, it might have been kind of fun. I mean, a lot of guys wonder what it would be like to be a girl. But, Danny, I'm afraid I'm going to be a girl for the rest of my life, and... and I don't know what to do about it."

I was practically in tears. I was becoming so emotional, I didn't know what to do. Danny looked for a moment as if he was going to move toward me. If he had, I don't know what would have happened. A part of me wanted him to do it. I needed someone to tell me it was all going to work out while holding onto me. But wouldn't that just be giving in?

"Are... are you okay?" he asked softly.

"I... I think so," I sniffled. With effort, I managed to suppress disappointment that he hadn't held me.

"Then let's get you home," he said.

We managed to keep the conversation a little lighter the rest of the way. George was sixteen and had a car, so he had picked Danny and Jack up that morning. Since he had picked up Danny first, they had had a chance to compare notes before seeing Jack.

Apparently our old friend Wild Bill wasn't one bit happy with the role he had been given. His new persona of Glen MacReady wasn't all that he would have wished for. Wild Bill had been talented at football but had been a dork. Glen was a dork without football talent. If the Judge was trying to punish him, he couldn't have done a better job, and I said so

to Danny.

"True," Danny agreed, "but what is George being punished for?"

"George?" I asked. "What about George? He came out of this great. He's good looking, a great football player, and he seems to be bright."

"Yes, but he's also male."

"So?"

Danny sighed, "That's why he wanted to get together with me today. He isn't too sure about being male. He would rather be female."

"But why?" I asked. "He's got everything now."

"Except his sex," Danny pointed out. "Think of it this way, Sam. You're attractive, personable, and someone told me you currently have one of the top five grade points in our class. Some people might say you've got everything."

"Yeah, but I'm a..." My voice trailed off. He was right, of course. Of my friends who remembered their old lives, I was probably an object of envy to some of them. Jill, it seemed, would prefer to be me since I was a girl. Darla was just happy to be female at last, but I would imagine she would prefer to be Sam. Maybe some of the others would rather be me, too.

"So did you hear anything from any of our teammates?" Danny asked.

"No," I said slowly, unwilling to betray Darla's confidence. "I've been in a group of girls all morning, and most of them don't remember anything."

Our conversation had brought me to my front door. "Uh, do you want to come in?" I asked, just a little nervously.

"Oh, no," Danny said self-consciously. "I...uh...have some studying to do. I'm apparently pretty high in class standings, too, and I think I'd like to keep it that way."

"Okay," I said turning away, just a tad disappointed.

"Hey, wait!"

I turned back to him. "Yes?"

"I noticed there was a new Van Damme movie playing tonight at seven, and since you like his flicks, I thought..." He looked at the expression on my face and hastened to add, "I mean, it wouldn't be a date or anything. I mean, you and I used to go to the movies together before. I just thought..."

"Sure," I said impulsively, almost regretting it as I said it. No matter what we chose to call it, I suppose it was still a date.

"You mean it?"

"I mean it," I admitted as much to myself as to Danny. "Pick me up at six thirty."

He grinned. "See you then."

I closed the door behind me with a sigh. Why had I said yes? Oh, I suppose I could pretend that I really wanted to see the movie, but I really didn't care. It's just that it seemed to mean a lot to Danny, and he was my friend.

"Well, so how is Danny?" a young boy's voice teased. So I was about to meet my kid brother, Josh, at last, I realized. He was lying on a couch in the living room, a comic book open on his lap. There was no denying him as my brother. He was almost a younger, male version of me, auburn hair and all. I had been right about the family picture being recent. He appeared to be about twelve.

"He's fine," I said airily, refusing to rise to the bait. As Jace, I had teased my own sister unmercifully when I had been Josh's age. I knew all the tricks, but he didn't know that.

"So did he kiss you?"

"Why would you want to know?"

He hadn't expected that question, so he just snorted and went back to his comic. He was a shade, but he acted just like I had acted when I was his age. I'd be able to get along fine with Josh. I knew as much about being a twelve-year-old boy as he did.

I greeted my parents, both of whom were busy with household chores, and retreated to my room for the rest of the day. I was intrigued with Danny's revelation that I was one of the top students in the class, and I resolved to stay near the top. I think it was the competitive instincts I had developed playing football. I might not be able to break up a thirty-yard pass pattern now, but I could ace my next algebra exam.

Fortunately, Sam took excellent notes. A small notebook written in a distinctly feminine hand that was now mine outlined all my assignments for the next week. There was to be a history quiz on Tuesday. No problem. As a history major in college, I could probably ace the quiz without looking at the book. I decided to study for the quiz later. It would almost be like taking a break.

My algebra assignment didn't look too bad, but I hadn't taken a match course in quite a while. I would have to bear down to keep the A I apparently had there. Chemistry would be a particular problem. I had done okay in chemistry in high school, but it had been a tough course. Come to think of it, it was when I was taking chemistry that I had made the decision to concentrate on sports.

I put the notebook down, lost for a moment in thought. There are turning points in everyone's life that don't seem too earthshaking at the time but have lasting effects on one's life. I had been a male version of Samantha when I had been her age in high school. My sophomore year, I was one of the top five in a very large class, destined for great things. I had planned to follow in my father's footsteps and be a doctor. What had changed?

Well, for one thing, I had been good in sports. It was a talent derived as much by my size and intelligence as by any inherited instinct. My own father had set sports aside in high school to concentrate on his future medical career. I had done just the opposite. Why?

Then I remembered. It was near the end of my sophomore year that my mother and father started having trouble. She complained that he was never around for family activities and that he never showed any affection for anyone. He complained that she had no idea of the pressures he faced daily as a surgeon. The trouble spilled over that

next fall. My sister Joan had been the mediator in many of their disputes, but her mind was on college then, often off with her friends through the summer. Although I had tried to act as mediator in my sister's absence, I wasn't as adroit at it as she had been.

I think I began to feel I might be on the same road as my father. I could do well in school, get into a top college, go on to medical school, and be a doctor just like my father, but to what end? To find myself trapped in an unhappy marriage years later, unable to separate my home life from my professional life? It didn't seem all that attractive. So I had began to set my studies aside and concentrate on athletics. As luck would have it, I was good enough to excel at football. Oh, I still did reasonably well in school. I was, after all, pretty bright. But I had eschewed my true potential.

Why?

The truth was, I didn't want to be like my father. Yes, I could finally admit that to myself. It had taken the loss of my balls to make me realize it, but I had ignored my true potential just to avoid being the cold, aloof surgeon that my father had been. That was why I had opted for something like history. That was why I had begun to drift into a life that I now realized would have never been satisfying to me. In fact, I had already resolved in my final moments as Jace to be willing to drift into a most unsatisfying life.

I had been given a second chance, I thought suddenly. Here I was, only a sophomore but with an excellent grade point. I wouldn't have football to distract me now, so I would have the extra time I needed to stay near the top of my class. Then what? Well, maybe a good college and then on to medical school. Doctor Samantha Wallace. That actually sounded pretty good. It had taken the loss of my masculinity to tell me the truth: I really wanted to be a doctor; I just didn't want to be like my father.

It was a far happier, more resolute Samantha who answered the door at six thirty. I had spent the entire afternoon poring over a chemistry text. When I concentrated on it, it was actually pretty easy. I had taken breaks only long enough to eat and touch up my makeup to get ready

to go to the movies with Danny. Since I had plowed directly into my studies, I didn't even feel the need to change for our date. I was looking in the mirror and smiling as the doorbell rang, thinking of how I wasn't one-hundred percent girl in my thoughts yet. If I had been a girl all my life, I would have felt the need to change clothes just for the fun of it.

As I opened the door, Danny gave me a funny look.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing," he told me. "It's just that this morning, you seemed... different."

"I'm a whole new me," I said with a cryptic smile, grabbing a sweater against the early fall chill.

As we walked out of the movie, Danny asked, "Well, what did you think of it?"

"It was good," I said without much conviction. To be honest, I had been a little disappointed with it. I usually went to a Van Damme movie with a bunch of guys, and we would really get into the action. Maybe it was my sudden lack of testosterone, but I had actually been a little bored with the movie. It was all action with only a hint of romance. I had also experienced an uncomfortable feeling when I caught myself musing that Van Damme had nice buns.

That had set me off on another train of thought. Was I becoming attracted to men? I had only been a girl for a little over a day, but it seemed as if I spent very little time looking at girls' breasts, asses, and legs and more time looking at guys. Even when I looked at girls, it was more to analyze what they were wearing or how they had done their hair or makeup. Well, I wanted to be a doctor, and my doctor father had been very clinical when he had finally gotten around to explaining the birds and the bees to me. I realized that the basis of sexual attraction went well beyond the intellectual. Oh sure, there were aspects of attraction that went beyond hormones and pheromones, but those aspects allowed us to pick a specific member of the opposite gender.

Walking out of the movie with Danny, I came to the realization that, like it or not, I was becoming attracted to him. That didn't mean I was ready to hop into bed with him or even grope with him in the front seat of his car, but I was finding that I enjoyed being with him in a way that transcended our long-standing friendship.

"Want to get something to drink?" he asked.

"Sure." I found I really wanted to go someplace with Danny—someplace where we could talk and get to know each other better. That sounded odd to me since I had known him well for several years, but I was a different person now, and I needed to know aspects of him that I had never known before. Besides, just because he had remained male didn't mean that there hadn't been changes to him mentally as well. As I was beginning to understand, much of who we are is determined by the body we wear.

Rusty's Burger Barn seemed to be the hangout of choice for every Ovid High student. It seemed as if half the people we had come to know in Ovid were there. Teresa and Geena were there with their football-playing boyfriends. True to their word at the party, they seemed to have the guys eating out of their hands. I think they were actually enjoying themselves. Their new roles in Ovid were almost like a private joke that only they could share.

George James was there too, trying to keep his full attention on an attractive young blonde girl while being constantly distracted by teammates and well-wishers. Ah, the life of a football hero.

Part 8

Darla was there, dressed in the manner she had always wanted for herself, I was sure. Her brown hair was pinned up, revealing shell-like ears with long, dangling earrings. She wore a tight pink sweater and displayed a substantial amount of nylon-covered leg beyond her matching skirt. The guy she was with wasn't noticing that, though. He was too busy trying to imagine what her small but pert breasts must look like under the sweater. She was having the time of her life. I was actually happy for her.

Even Jennifer and Barry were there, sharing a table away from the crowd. Neither looked particularly pleased to be there, and Jennifer actually would turn to face the crowd occasionally with an almost angry scowl. Then she would turn back and engage Barry in an animated conversation. I could almost imagine them to be Lenin and Trotsky, sitting in the back of some aging European café while they plotted the overthrow of the rest of the patrons. I hoped they weren't plotting to cause trouble, but I was pretty sure that was what they were doing.

'Cause trouble?' I caught myself thinking as we sat and ordered Cokes and an order of fries to munch on. Just a few hours before, I had found myself hoping they would succeed. What had changed? Didn't I want to be Jace again? Well yes, I suppose I did in a theoretical sort of way. If someone had offered me the chance to be Samuel Wallace instead of Samantha, keeping my new family and my class ranking and all that the ranking implied about my future, I would have jumped at the chance. Oh sure, I would miss my old family, but not all that much. We were never the closest of families. If I missed anyone, it would probably be my sister, Joan. But I seldom saw her anymore. She was engaged and living back east.

As for the rest of my family, my younger brother was a spoiled brat. With all the marital problems my parents had, he had learned to play them off against each other. My new younger brother Josh, was preferable. And as for parents, I supposed I still loved them and I would miss them, but they seemed intent upon breaking up their marriage. I had expected a call from them at any time telling me they had finally split the sheets.

Still, I planned to work with my teammates to try to return to our old lives. It sounded almost perverse to me to think that, but I was a team player. Besides, maybe it wasn't too late for Jace to figure out a way to get into medical school. My grades were very good. I had the top grade point on the team. Maybe some medical school—possibly out of the country—would give me a chance.

"I'm really glad you decided to go to the movies with me tonight,"

Danny told me. "I was afraid you... well, you know."

I found myself putting my hand on his. "Let's not worry about that anymore," I said softly so that others around us wouldn't hear. "I think we're going to be stuck this way, and I just decided if I had to be Samantha Wallace, I'd better start acting like her."

Danny gave me a little smile. "I'm pleased." Then he looked a little stricken. "I mean I'm pleased for you. I didn't mean how it affects us or anything."

"Hey, we're friends, remember?"

He relaxed a little, "Oh sure."

We changed the conversation to topics of school and our friends, new and old. Other couples came up to talk to us, Jack and Jessica actually joining us for a while. Then, about eleven, we decided to head home.

Danny walked me to the door this time. That felt funny to me, but I was actually glad he did. We looked at each other for a moment after I got the door open, as if uncertain as to what to do next. Finally, I said, "Well, goodnight, friend."

He gave me a little smile but kept his hands to himself. "Goodnight, friend."

Then it happened before I could stop it. It was an impulse that came so far from left field that I hadn't even had the chance to consider what it might mean. I arched up onto my toes and gave him a little sisterly kiss on the cheek. He looked as if he had been shot, and I thought for one terrible moment that I had done something wrong. What if our roles had been reversed and a female Larry Gunn had suddenly kissed me on the cheek? Would I have fled screaming into the night? I mean, just a couple of days before we had both been young men. Now we were... friends.

I felt my face begin to flush. I thought I had just made a fool of myself. Danny just stared at me as if he were unable to move. Without another word, I fled into the house, closing the door softly behind me. I

was a hodgepodge of emotions. I was embarrassed for what I had done. If we ever got back to our old lives, how would I ever be able to face Larry again? I was disgusted with myself. I was a guy, damn it! Or at least I had been one for most of my life. But I was also very confused. A small part of me—the part that had suddenly risen to the top of my consciousness—was actually a little pleased with what I had done. I mean, if I ended up stuck as a girl—and I was fairly certain our efforts to get our old lives back would fail—then I would have to get used to seeing boys in a far different light. I had taken an important first step in that direction with that small, innocent kiss.

“Is that you, Sam?”

It was my new mother’s voice, shaking me out of my reverie and making me realize I was just standing there hiding behind the door, listening to Danny’s receding footsteps. “Yes, it’s me,” I replied.

“Well, I’m glad you’re home early,” she said from the doorway of the darkened bedroom where I could hear my new father softly snoring.

“We have to be at church early tomorrow. Your father and I are greeting. Are you planning on going to Sunday School?”

“Uh... I don’t think so.”

“Then you can just ride to services with your father and me,” she decided.

Church? Well, why not? I hadn’t gone much in college, but my family had been fairly strong Methodists. I hoped I hadn’t become Catholic or something. I had no idea how they conducted services. All I knew was that they did a lot of kneeling and crossed themselves a lot. Maybe in Ovid, they worshiped the Greek and Roman gods. I actually snickered to myself, thinking about how odd a congregation of Midwestern Americans would look standing around in the Temple of Jupiter sacrificing a goat—or whatever you sacrificed to Jupiter.

Frivolous thoughts about church at least distracted me from thinking about Danny. Still trying to visualize what a group of Americans would be like worshiping Jupiter, I got ready for bed and fell asleep almost at once.

Dressing as a girl was getting more natural for me, I realized the next morning, as I got ready for church. It seemed almost natural to put on a pastel blue slip dress patterned with tiny white flowers. And the nylons and pale blue pumps matched well. I actually found the two-inch heel they sported not too hard to walk in at all. A dainty gold necklace with matching earrings and thin gold bracelets made nice accents, and I thought I looked quite nice as I finished off my makeup in the bathroom mirror.

“Are you about ready?” the frustrated voice of my father boomed from the entryway.

“Almost,” I called back, inspecting my lipstick. This was the first time I had applied it completely by myself, depending before on my automatic help. I didn’t want to look like a clown. I thought I had done quite a nice job. I had relied on a little automatic help for the eye shadow and the highlights on my cheeks, but I still considered my performance an accomplishment.

“We’re going to be late!” he hollered again. “Why does it take you so long?”

Why indeed! I had often wondered the same thing as I had watched my real mother and sister get ready. Now I knew the answer. Maybe my new father should try doing everything I had to do to look beautiful, to look presentable.

“She’s a teenage girl,” I heard my new mother explain, as if that answered it all.

And it did, too. I was learning how to be a girl. I still wasn’t comfortable with it, and I would still have preferred to be male, but as long as I had to be a girl, I wanted to be a normal one. Each new thing that I learned—whether it was how to apply eye shadow or how to accessorize an outfit—made me feel a little more comfortable with myself.

“Ready,” I announced, grabbing my blue purse and trying not to be caught by my father’s frustrated stare or my brother’s impish grin. In spite of his muttering, we made it to church on time.

I got the feeling as I stood in the back of the sanctuary while they greeted parishioners that people were staring at me. I suppose they were, but not, I realized, because I looked out of place. Guys my age greeted me with a friendly “Hi, Sam!” Their fathers cast sidelong glances so they wouldn’t be seen staring at jail bait. I watched with a mixture of embarrassment and amusement as these good church-going men slipped a look at my long, graceful legs. Their wives smiled at me as if I was a neophyte member of their sorority—a girl they had known most of their lives who was rapidly blossoming into a woman just like them.

Then Danny came in and I felt an embarrassing flush cross my face. I didn’t realize that Danny would be going to the same church. He was a Catholic. No, I corrected myself, Larry was a Catholic. Danny had apparently experienced a change of religion just like me. I was no longer a Methodist, but instead a member of the First Baptist Church of Ovid.

“Hi, Sam,” Danny said a little shyly as he came up in front of me.

I looked down a little, trying not to stare directly into his eyes. “Hi, Danny.” I suddenly felt like a schoolgirl. Then I realized I really was a schoolgirl. ‘Danny is just a friend,’ I reminded myself. I’m not really a girl; I just look like one. ‘Hey, old buddy, how’s it hanging? Got any lately? How about those Chiefs? You wanna go get a couple of beers?’ Oh, what I would have given to be able to say any of those things just like I used to say them!

Instead, I was appropriately demure. I tried to look around the room, but I was greeted with amused glances from the adults. They didn’t see two guys who were college friends who played football, drank beer, and chased girls together. Instead, they saw a young man dressed in a tweed sport coat, colorful tie and khaki slacks talking to a sweet young thing in her Sunday best with the obvious objective of courting her. I found that a little disturbing. What I found even more disturbing was that I sort of wanted to be courted. I mean... Oh, I really don’t know what I meant.

“Uh... are you going to be studying for that history test today?” Danny

ventured.

"I suppose so," I replied. I really hadn't decided what to study. I would need to catch up in everything. I hadn't planned to study much for the history test, since as a history major, I should have been able to do well on any high school history exam. Still, I supposed it wouldn't hurt to review...

"Do you mind if I come over for a little while this afternoon?" he asked. "I never was terribly good at history. Maybe you could give me a little review. I could do the same for you in algebra."

That sold it. I really did need a little help in algebra, and Larry had a minor in math. "Okay."

His face brightened. "About two?"

I smiled back. "Sure."

Danny joined his parents and I joined Josh and my parents for the services. I was a little relieved to see that a Baptist service was not too different from a Methodist one. I had to stifle a giggle or two, though, watching Danny a couple of pews away. He had to resist the urge to cross himself and kneel a couple of times.

We weren't the only ones from the team in church that morning. Jennifer Tilton was there in a dress, and from the scowl on her face, I would say that her new parents had probably had to threaten her life before she agreed to wear it. Barry Hartman was there as well, and I couldn't help but notice how he kept sneaking glances at Jennifer. It seemed to me that he was oddly attracted to his former friend. I would imagine that Jennifer would have gladly killed him if she had suspected it for an instant.

After church, Jennifer made her way over to me. "My, don't you look pretty today," she said sweetly, but her eyes told a different story.

"Very funny," I replied quietly. "Same to you."

She snorted. "Don't remind me! My dear sweet mother informed me in no uncertain terms that either I dressed like this today or I would be grounded for a month. Grounded! I haven't been grounded since I was

in eighth grade. I mean when I was Darren.”

“Yeah, it’s tough to be fifteen again,” I agreed.

“Look, Jace,” Jennifer began, “I get the feeling some of our guys are getting a little too comfortable with their new roles. You aren’t, are you?”

“Me?” I said a little nervously. “Of course not.” It was a lie, though. I had just realized that I had been a little uncomfortable when she had called me ‘Jace.’

“Good,” she said with a rare smile. “I thought I could depend on you. How about Larry?”

“Larry?” Oh, Danny. “Sure, he’s with us.”

“So is Dennis,” she told me. “That gives us a pretty good nucleus. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She walked off, trying to recapture some of her old male swagger. It was a waste of time, though. Her hips swayed with a definite girlish charm. No amount of attempted swagger could take that away.

As I rode home with my parents, I wondered if Jennifer was right. Of course, most of our team had no idea they had even been changed, but were the rest of us becoming comfortable with our new identities? Worse yet, was I? I had to admit to myself that each passing hour made my role as Sam become more and more real. When I had first seen my new body, I had been frightened—almost panicked. Then, I began to look at it a little more objectively as if I were my old self, admiring a pretty girl. Now though, in just two short days, I seemed to be integrating my soul as it were with this body. I didn’t want to lose all of Jace, but he was starting to become only a memory—a boy who had grown to manhood and then moved away. When I looked at Sam’s pretty face in the mirror, I saw me. When I moved, I moved with the knowledge that my body was female, jutting out here and indenting there. When I looked at Danny...

“Would you help me with lunch, dear?”

“Huh? Oh sure,” I muttered, still lost in thought.

“You want to throw the football until lunch?” Josh asked our father.

“Sure,” he replied with a smile.

Now was that fair? They would throw the football while I worked in the kitchen. Then I realized it made sense. I was bonding with my mother while ‘the boys’ were bonding. Still, as I got changed before helping my mother, I found myself wishing I could throw the football too. I wondered if I threw like a girl. Probably, I realized with a sigh as I started making a salad under my mother’s direction.

At least my brother got saddled with doing the dishes after lunch. All-in-all, it was fair. I found I actually enjoyed cooking. I always had enjoyed it when I thought about it. What I hated was cleaning up.

As I retired to my room, I thought about how smoothly I had accepted my new family. I really didn’t notice their slight transparency anymore. It was almost the way you ignore people’s blemishes and even disfigurements as you get to know them as individuals. I was becoming comfortable as well. The sway of my breasts and ass and the tickle of my long auburn hair and slight tug of the earrings I wore no longer seemed unnatural. If I let myself go in that automatic mode, it was very easy to conform to feminine tasks. In the shower that morning, I had even shaved under my arms and my legs without a second thought.

‘Was I becoming like Darla? No,’ I thought. If given the opportunity, I would still return to my old life. But on the other hand, being Sam wasn’t so bad after all. I could live with it if I had to. I would even probably enjoy it. I had become reconciled to being Samantha Wallace.

Danny dropped in at two to study. We occupied the kitchen, tackling history first. Like me, Larry had always been a pretty good student, so he had no problem catching up in history. Likewise, I picked up on algebra pretty quickly. I hadn’t taken a math class since my sophomore year of college, but I had aced that course. That meant I understood the principles. I just had to refresh myself on the mechanics of the subject.

After a couple of hours of serious study, we took a break on the patio in back of the house. We sat in lounge chairs sipping on sodas and enjoying the unusually warm fall sun. At least it was unusual for us. Northern Missouri was starting to get a little chilly by that time of year, but Oklahoma, a bit further south, seemed to be enjoying late summer, although it tended to cool off some in the evening. We were alone on the patio, the rest of my family glued to the television where the Dallas Cowboys were struggling through a poor season.

“Did you want to watch the game?” Danny asked, nodding toward the house where the cheers of the game could be faintly heard through the open windows.

I thought about it. “Not really. I guess it would remind me too much of what we’ve had to give up.”

“Playing football?” Danny asked with a grin. “We can still throw a ball around if you want.”

Did I want to? I had been envious earlier when Josh and dad were throwing the ball around, but now that I had the opportunity to do so, I realized I really didn’t want to. Besides, I might break a nail. Not that they were that long, but...

“Do you?”

I sighed. “I guess not.”

Danny propped up on one arm and looked at me. “I can’t get over how much you’ve changed.”

I looked down at my bare legs. I was wearing a pair of denim cutoffs and a beige T-top with a scalloped neck. There were tan sandals on my feet. I had worn outfits not too different as Jace, but they had never looked like this on me. I was all girl, that was for certain.

“Yeah, it’s really strange to be in this body,” I agreed.

“I don’t mean just that,” he clarified. He looked a little sheepish. “Sorry if this bothers you, but I meant the way you act and...”

I sat up. “What’s wrong with the way I act?”

“Nothing,” he said soothingly. “Nothing at all, for a... a...”

“Girl,” I finished for him.

He gave me a disarming smile. “Well... yes.”

I think he expected me to be angry. I expected to be, too, but I wasn’t. Instead, I was curious. “What do you mean?” I asked softly.

“Well,” he began, “I don’t know, Sam. I guess the... well, just look at how you’re sitting.”

I was sitting on the edge of the lounge chair, my legs crossed as I looked intently at Danny. “What’s the matter with the way I’m sitting?”

“It’s... well... look at your legs. They’re crossed at the knees. You would never have sat that way as Jace.”

“I probably couldn’t sit this way as Jace,” I pointed out. “I would have crushed my... well, you know.”

“Sure,” he agreed. “Your balls. That’s another thing. You found it hard to say balls. It isn’t ladylike, is it?”

“This is the nineties,” I countered. “I can say... well, whatever I want.”

“But you don’t want to say it, do you?”

I was silent. He was right. I had been a normal guy. I didn’t use a lot of bad language, but an occasional four-letter word slipped out. Now though, it just didn’t seem right.

“I don’t know how else to say it, Sam,” he pressed, more confident now. “You act exactly like a girl. The way you walk, the way you talk—it’s as if you had been a girl your entire life.”

“I know,” I admitted after a moment’s silence. “I don’t know what it means. Danny, you don’t suppose I’m losing my identity like most of the rest of the team, do you? I mean, what if we all end up forgetting who we are? Maybe some of us just take longer to forget.”

He must have seen the terror on my face, for he gently wrapped one of my trembling hands in his larger one and said, “I don’t think so, Sam. I still remember everything about my old life. Don’t you?”

“Well,” I replied with a little giggle, “I don’t seem to remember you holding my hand before.”

He started to draw back, a pained look on his face, until I quickly added, “Not that I mind. I mean... well, I... I... think I like you holding my hand.”

There. I had said it. I had stepped over the edge. It had been coming almost from the hour of my transformation. Every time I saw Danny, every time I talked to him, I began to see him differently than I had ever seen another guy before. His smile, his gentle, intelligent eyes, his self-confident gait, his... masculinity, all spoke to me in a way I could never have imagined only a few days before. At first, it had frightened me and I had been determined to avoid him at all costs. Now, though, I knew I wanted him near me, to touch me, to... to...

“I just made some lemonade,” my mother called from the kitchen. “Do you two want any?”

I found my extended hand suddenly free and at my side as I felt my face flush. We went into the kitchen together, and I kept wondering what would have happened if she hadn’t called. More importantly, what had I wanted to happen? The next day, we would all be meeting as a team to decide a course of action that could give us back our original identities, but is that what I really wanted? I was becoming almost like Darla. Although I had never wanted to be a girl like she had, I was becoming increasingly reluctant to change back even if I could. Here in Ovid, I had the opportunity to start over, to be a top student. I had a new family which wasn’t slowly drifting apart as my old one had been. And I had Danny. Yes, I finally admitted to myself, I was attracted to him. And I knew without a doubt that he was attracted to me.

After having lemonade with my family, Danny excused himself and my father started to cook some steaks on the patio grill while I helped my mother with a potato salad. The Cowboys had lost, but that had been expected. So I spent the rest of the evening just getting to know my family better.

Life was beginning to feel normal to me. I was the female version of the older brother in a real-life *Leave it to Beaver* family. A couple of times, I almost called Josh 'Beave.' My new identity was constantly reinforced, not only by my family but by the half dozen phone calls from various friends from school. Some, I hadn't even met yet, so I kept a copy of my high school yearbook by my phone. A girl named Myra called first. I identified her as an attractive blonde in my class named Myra Smithwick. She had been out of school Friday, so I had to help her catch up on all the gossip. I was amazed at how much I actually knew and was able to tell her.

Jessica called next, just to tell me about her afternoon with Jack. I wondered again which of my teammates they had been, but realized it was now of little importance. We agreed to meet for lunch the next day at school.

The last call of the night came just before nine. It was Danny. He sounded strangely down in the mouth, worrying me. Was he having the same second thoughts I had experienced Friday night? Did he find it hard to think of me as a girl? Was he trying to ditch me? Finally, I blurted out, "Danny, what's wrong?"

"Jennifer called, or I guess I should say Darren since she refuses to think of herself as Jennifer."

"And?"

"And there's going to be a meeting tomorrow after school. A team meeting," he said.

I was a little relieved. "But we knew Coach Jessup—or rather Ms. Drew—was planning a meeting."

"I know," he agreed, "but I..."

"But you what, Danny?" I asked.

"I... don't want to lose you, Sam."

I was silent. I didn't want to lose him either, I realized. Whatever power in Ovid had transformed us had done too good a job. Danny and I were becoming a couple, just as practically everyone else in Ovid

thought we were.

“Sam?” His voice was frightened. I think he was afraid I had hung up on him.

“Yes, Danny?”

“I shouldn’t have said that,” he said as an apology.

“It’s okay, Danny,” I told him softly. “I guess I don’t want to lose you either.”

His voice brightened. “Do you mean that?”

“Would I say it if I didn’t?” I returned.

“Can I pick you up for school tomorrow?”

The answer, of course, was ‘yes.’ I was as giddy as a schoolgirl when I went to bed that night, but of course as I have remarked before, that was exactly what I was. The difference was that with each moment, I was becoming more pleased with that.

Danny picked me up the next morning at a quarter after seven. Although neither of us had discussed it in advance, I think we had each chosen to play out our first full day back in high school as a normal day. He was Danny and I was Sam and that was all there was to it. We knew we faced a team meeting after school—or at least a meeting with the members of the team who were aware of their transformations. But until then, we would be what we appeared to be.

Part 9

It seemed oddly comfortable being back in high school. To be honest, my high school days had been my happiest. My parents were not having as many problems when I started high school, and in my first two years of high school, I had been able to balance athletics and academics to the point that I excelled in both. It wasn’t until my junior year that I began to concentrate on football to the detriment of my studies. Of course, that’s when I took chemistry and my parents started having more problems.

I had gleaned a lot about my role as Sam over the weekend. I knew I

was supposed to be both bright and popular—a winning combination if ever there was one. And of course, it didn't hurt to be attractive. Danny was my male counterpart, so we were a natural couple.

I noticed that most of the guys I knew who had become girls had thrown themselves into the part. Only Dusty—now Geena—had worn a skirt to school, but her long, coffee-brown legs looked terrific extending out from her short skirt. Like me, Teresa and Darla had chosen to wear shorts on the warm fall day—denim cutoffs with dark tees and open vests. Only Jennifer, in what appeared to be a hopeless attempt to hide her femininity, wore a sweatshirt and baggy khaki pants with brown hiking shoes instead of the cooler sandals the rest of us wore. She would be dying in the afternoon heat, but that was her business.

I found I enjoyed my day in school. Classes were fun, in spite of the fact that for me it was simply a review of what I had learned several years before. It felt good to be an outstanding student, and my class day ended with a feeling of pride and accomplishment. So it was with trepidation that Danny and I entered Ms. Drew's classroom after school.

We were among the first to enter. Ms. Drew was already standing at the front of the classroom. Our Coach Jessup had become a very attractive woman of perhaps thirty-five. She had almost black hair trimmed quite short. I suddenly realized she was the woman on the bus who appeared to be an Indian. I had almost not recognized her since in addition to shorter hair, she had removed all the makeup and jewelry she had worn right after her transformation. Her outfit was rather mannish, consisting of a plain white blouse which could easily have been mistaken for a man's dress shirt. She wore dark brown slacks and nondescript brown loafers. In spite of her best efforts to appear masculine, she failed, for Ms. Drew had a very feminine figure which her attire did little to disguise.

Jennifer and Barry were standing with her, going over what appeared to be a list. They all looked up and nodded at Danny and me as we entered. Jennifer had been outspoken from the start, but Barry had

said practically nothing, content to shadow his old friend Jennifer—or Darren as she preferred to still be called. I was becoming more certain that Barry was developing an attachment to Jennifer. If he was, I knew he would have to keep quiet about it. If she suspected for a heartbeat that he had any interest in her as a young woman, she would probably never speak to him again. I remembered that as Dennis, Barry had developed a reputation for patience. It would serve him well now, I mused.

The rest of our little cadre trickled in by ones and twos. The next was a blonde I didn't recognize. She was dressed much like I was and was very pretty in an athletic sort of way, and I suddenly realized she was one of Ovid High's cheerleaders. She smiled at me when she walked in and took a seat a couple of rows away. Geena and Teresa walked in together. I had heard them giggling together in the hall, but they had put on their serious faces when they walked into the room. George and Glen walked in together. I was pleased to see they appeared to be more friends than rivals. George seemed to be talking to Glen about how to get more power out of his throws, and to his credit, Glen, unlike when he was Wild Bill, was listening attentively.

"Who are we missing?" Ms. Drew asked, looking up suddenly from the list.

"Just Austin," Jennifer told her. I wondered if Darla was even going to show up. She had no desire to return to an existence as Austin. I needn't have been concerned, for she scurried into the classroom and sat quietly not far from me.

"Okay, then we're all here," Ms. Drew said, much as she would have spoken at a team meeting a few days before. "Now as nearly as we can tell, we are the only ones from the team who remember who we are. Does anybody know of anyone else?" After a moment of silence, she continued, "Then we can get started. The purpose of this meeting is to try to figure out a way to get the Judge to change us back. Now, I'm a little concerned about some of the stories I've heard about you guys. It seems some of you are getting a little too comfortable in their new identities. I thought you guys had balls."

“We used to,” Teresa muttered a little too loudly, causing several of us—all girls—to titter.

Ms. Drew frowned. “You guys think that’s funny?” The room was quiet. “Think about how funny it’s going to be when you have your first period, or when some guy knocks you up. I want to really hear you guys laugh while you’re giving birth to some little bastard.” Her stare was Coach Jessup all the way. Each of us looked down.

“All right then,” she continued. “Remember, we’re not just doing this for ourselves. We’re doing it for the whole team. Now, are you all with me?”

The responses were quiet—muffled “yeahs” and “sures”—but no one said no.

It wasn’t enough, though. I think she sensed a lack of commitment on our part. She looked around the room, finally zeroing in on Darla.

“How about you, Blake? I didn’t hear anything from you. Maybe you like having a pussy?”

“I heard her, coach,” I lied. “She’s with us.”

Darla turned to give me a thankful look.

“I want to hear it from her,” Ms. Drew growled.

“I’m with you,” Darla said quietly.

“Louder!” Ms. Drew shouted.

“I’m with you!” Darla yelled back, although in her soft, sweet voice, it seemed to lack sincerity.

And we all were with her. I knew Darla didn’t want to be changed into Austin, but she was a team player. We all were. No matter what our own personal desires might be, Coach Jessup had emerged from Ms. Drew to remind us of our responsibilities to the team.

“Take over, McDougal,” she said to Jennifer.

But before she could start, a new person stepped into the room. I recognized her as the school nurse, a Mrs. Rawlins. She was about

forty with short dark hair and Mediterranean features. She was fairly attractive for her age, and like us, she was real. "May I join you?" she asked.

"This is a private meeting," Ms. Drew replied coldly.

"I know," the nurse agreed. "But like you, I remember who I was. And I've been here several weeks. I might be able to help."

Ms. Drew grunted, "All right."

So Jennifer began, "I've put together a list of people here in Ovid who rumor has it remember who they were. It isn't a very long list, and it's not complete. We didn't even have you on the list," she said, speaking directly to Mrs. Rawlins. "But the more people we can face the Judge with, the more weight our argument will have." It was almost comical to see that pretty little blonde strutting in front of the room in a baggy sweatshirt and cargo pants trying to act like a little general. "Now Jace, I'm going to need your help."

I was startled. First, I was becoming used to my new name, and second, because I hadn't planned to take a very active role in the plot. Before I could reply, she explained, "You've always been one of the most persuasive guys on the team, and since Danny is able to drive, the two of you can check out this list."

"But what do I do when I find someone like us?" I asked.

Jennifer shrugged. "Just tell them to join us in confronting the Judge. When he finds out we won't play his silly game, he'll have to change us back and let us go."

"It may not be that simple." That was my thought, but it was Mrs. Rawlins who said it. We all turned to look at her. "You all don't understand what you're facing here. Have any of you tried to call home?"

Teresa and the blonde cheerleader raised their hands. Mrs. Rawlins looked at Teresa. "What did you find out?"

Teresa sighed, "My mother said she had never heard of me. She didn't have a son named Bert and never had."

“I found out the same thing,” the blonde said. “I called my dad and my older brother both. They had never heard of Horace White.”

So that’s what had happened to Horace. From black football player to white cheerleader, and he seemed to be handling it well.

“None of us exist anymore,” the nurse went on. “We don’t have any lives to get back to. You were all members of a football team from what I’ve heard. We get newspapers here in Ovid from other cities. Did you see anything about a missing football team?”

“According to the Tulsa paper, Muskogee State played someone else last weekend,” George explained.

“Think of the power that did that,” Mrs. Rawlins told us. “You know who they are, don’t you?”

To my surprise, not everyone did, so I answered, “They’re Roman gods.”

“Yes they are,” she agreed. “Jupiter, Mercury, Minerva, Venus, and who knows what other gods. I was an Oklahoma State Patrol officer—a male officer. I was chasing a drug dealer who had escaped from a sting operation. He crashed into my car while trying to get away. That was just outside Ovid. Officer Mercer brought us both here. You can see what happened to me, but what happened to the drug dealer should frighten you all to death.”

She paused, noting that she had our full attention before going on.

“The drug dealer was laughing his ass off at what had been done to me. Then, with a wave of his hand, the Judge and everyone else in the courtroom found themselves standing in an open area in Sooner Park. The Judge uttered another chant and I watched in horror as the drug dealer changed. His flesh and clothing became bark and his fingers and arms stretched out into tree limbs with leaves growing from them. He let out a horrible howl—the last sounds his throat would ever make. In seconds, he was a large oak tree. And the most terrible thing—and don’t ask me how I know this—is that I think he still knows who he was.”

I felt a shudder run down my back. I think we all did, but it was Ms. Drew who answered. “I never said this wouldn’t take guts. Apparently you don’t have any.”

It was a cruel statement, and I expected Mrs. Rawlins to do anything except what she did do—she laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Ms. Drew growled.

“Have you ever been shot?” she asked in her own turn.

“No.”

Mrs. Rawlins got out of her seat and looked Ms. Drew in the eye. “Well I have—twice, in fact. The first time in the leg and the second time in the chest. Yet I came back for more. Our drug dealer friend fired off two rounds at me the day I was changed. There’s guts and there’s stupidity. I thought you’d be smart enough to see the difference.” She stormed out the door, pausing only long enough to tell us, “If you all follow him, there’s no telling what the Judge will do to you. He gave all of you good, decent lives. Don’t screw them up.”

I don’t know how many in that room took to heart what she had said, but I know I did. The problem was that we were still a team. I wasn’t going to be the first person in the room to let my teammates down. Apparently, we all felt the same way because nobody left—not even Darla.

We agreed that Friday would be the day we would confront the Judge. Barry had checked the courthouse schedule, and we knew the Judge would be in that day. Our little field trip would be unauthorized, but if it went as planned, we would be returned to our old lives and never have to worry about Ovid again.

As a final order of business, we discussed how we would get out of Ovid. Flying was out of the question. Our plane was damaged beyond reasonable repair and our pilot was apparently an unknowing teller in an Ovid bank. “I saw her when she changed and again when I was in the bank yesterday,” Marsha—the blonde who had been Horace White—told us. No one seemed to know what had happened to the co-

pilot.

"It doesn't matter," Ms. Drew decided. "We'll worry about that later."

Sure, I thought, if any of us had a later.

So for the next three days, I led a double life. During the day, I was just Samantha Wallace, high school girl. I chummed around with Jessica and some of the other girls. I even found out that one of my best friends was a shade—Myra Smithwick who had called me Sunday night. Apparently we had been friends for years.

After school, though, Danny and I would hop in his car and begin contacting each of the transformees on the list Jennifer had compiled. I found I was wasting my time, though. Jennifer, Barry and Ms. Drew had put together a list of fifteen people who remembered their past lives. Mrs. Rawlins wasn't one of the fifteen, that meant there were at least sixteen transformees besides our team—and I had to contact all of them. Since I had family commitments and studies, fifteen was a pretty healthy number to reach in person before Friday. But we did it.

Danny and I would both go to the door and introduce ourselves, but I would do most of the talking. Ten of the transformees had experienced a sex change—seven from male to female and three from female to male. The others—three men and two women—had remained the same sex. Even if the transformee retained his or her sex, there were usually other drastic changes. Three had been white but were now black, and all had become either younger or older. The most drastic change was a former forty-year-old white man who was now a pretty little black ten-year-old girl.

In spite of the changes that had been made in their lives, all had one thing in common: none of them wanted to change back.

"I don't understand it," I said, shaking my head as we left the last of our prospects—a former twenty-five-year-old man who was now a thirty-year-old Indian woman with two young children.

"Maybe they're frightened of the Judge," Danny suggested as he opened the car door for me.

“I don’t think so,” I replied when we were both in the car. “They don’t seem frightened. They seem... content. Yes, that’s it. They’re content with their lives.”

I couldn’t really blame them. I was becoming more content with my own life with each passing day. I could never have dreamed that I would actually enjoy being a girl, but I was. That isn’t to say I wouldn’t have preferred to have my old life back. I was pretty happy there, too, and if I was fortunate enough to be changed back, I... I what?

“What’s wrong?” Danny asked before he started the car.

“I was just thinking,” I said softly. “I was thinking about what I would do if I got my old life back.”

Danny stiffened. “What would you do?”

“I don’t know,” I replied honestly. “I think I had a good life, but this one’s better. Sometimes I miss my family—especially my sister—but I’ve grown attached to my family here. I was a good student before, but now I’m an outstanding student. I never would have made good enough grades as Jace to get into medical school, but now I think I can. And...”

My voice trailed off. I had gotten so excited that I had nearly said that as Jace, I had no steady girl friend, preferring to play the field. Now, though, there was Danny. We had been together a good portion of every day since our transformations. As guys, we had been good friends, confiding in each other as good friends often do. Now it was different. I looked at Danny in a far different way than I had ever looked at Larry. I couldn’t imagine losing the bond we had developed in the last few days.

I turned to Danny. He was looking at me with confusion, uncertain as to what I was thinking. Then, without warning, the confusion changed to anticipation as we drew closer to each other. At last I felt his lips touching mine. I felt a warm tingle throughout my body as his strong arm slipped around my back. The kiss, experimental and chaste at first became warmer and more forceful. I closed my eyes, suddenly light-headed and weak. It felt as if we were one being. As I put my

own arms around Danny, I found myself hoping the moment would never end.

At last, it did end though, with Danny looking into my eyes as I released a soft sigh. "You don't know how much I've wanted to do that," Danny said softly.

"Oh, Danny!" I exclaimed. "Is this wrong. I mean, I'm not really a girl."

"You're as much a girl as you want to be," he argued. "When I look at you, all I see is Samantha Wallace. And she is the most beautiful girl I've ever known."

That was it. I cried. I just broke down and cried. "Oh, Danny, what are we doing? I don't want to change back. I didn't want to admit it, even to myself. I'm as bad as Darla. What are we going to do?"

He shrugged. "What do you want to do? I suppose we don't have to go with the others to see the Judge tomorrow."

"Yes we do," I countered. "We owe it to the team. This may be the right thing for us, but think about some of the others. They're miserable here. We have to help them."

"Still a team player, eh?" Danny said with a smile.

I smiled back. "I'm afraid so."

Danny dropped me off at my house. Not right away, though. We spent a little time together parked out in Sooner Park. When I got to my room, I was still a virgin. I was only fifteen and I didn't want to be thought of the way as a guy I had thought of fifteen-year-old girls in high school who weren't. The funny thing is I didn't want to be a virgin. I wanted Danny in the worst way, but I knew now wasn't the time. Hopefully, we'd both know when the time was right.

My phone was ringing when I walked dreamily into my room. The voice on the other end brought me back to earth quickly enough.

"Jace? This is Darren."

Jace? Darren? Oh yeah.

She didn't wait for me to reply. "So how many others are going to be joining us tomorrow?"

"None," I replied as calmly as I could. I was a little embarrassed about my failure, in spite of the fact that I understood why no one wanted to join us. Everyone else was either happy, frightened of the Judge, or both. Why give up a perfectly good new life when the penalty might be dropping acorns in Sooner Park?

"None? Did you talk to everyone on the list?"

"Yes," I told her, annoyed that she would bother to question my work. "I think the longer we're here, the less likely it is that anyone wants to change back."

"Are you sure you're not describing yourself?" Jennifer—I refused to think of her as Darren—said coldly.

"I promised the team I would do my best and I did," I replied through gritted teeth. "I explained what we were going to do tomorrow and that it would probably be the only chance they would ever get to get their old lives back. But do you know what they all—all—told me?" I didn't wait for an answer. "They told me they liked their new lives, and even if they were not telling the truth—and I believe they are telling the truth—none of them want to cross the Judge."

"Pussies!"

I fought back the quip that some of them were, yes. "Look, maybe it's time we recognized that we're fighting against something too big for us."

"What are you saying, honey?" she asked sarcastically.

"I'm just saying that we're not in a position to demand anything. I think we need to be careful tomorrow."

"I think we can demand a lot," she countered. "If this Judge realizes we won't play his stupid little game, we can upset everything in Ovid. Just think—what if we contacted everyone right after he transformed them and told them to fight back. Eventually, the whole town would be against him."

‘Or there might be a lot more oak trees in Sooner Park,’ I thought to myself. “Let’s just be careful,” I warned. There was no reply. Jennifer hung up on me.

Why was that girl fighting this so much? There were a lot of positive things about Ovid. At first, I too, felt as she did, but I was starting to like being Sam. It didn’t seem queer to wear skirts and makeup. It seemed normal for this body. And it didn’t seem queer to like guys, especially guys like Danny. Sure, my football days were over, and I was weaker and didn’t have that bulge in my crotch anymore. But I had a chance to give my new life some direction. A career in medicine beckoned again—an opportunity I had thought was gone. I wasn’t looking forward to eventual periods or giving birth, but I suspected a lot of girls felt that way.

The real question, though, was not why Jennifer was fighting this, I realized. The real question was that if I felt the way I did, why was I helping her? ‘I wasn’t helping her,’ I told myself. ‘I was helping the team.’ I wasn’t about to be the only one of my teammates who remembered who wasn’t there Friday morning. I only hoped as I climbed into bed that I was doing the right thing.

It was almost like old times Friday morning. It was a team rally before the big game, even if most of the team wasn’t there. No one finked out. We were all there. We gathered in the high school parking lot before classes. Everyone was dressed about like we had been the previous Friday after our conversions. The boys wore sport coats and ties while the girls were in skirts—except for Ms. Drew and Jennifer who wore dressy pants. The main difference is that many of us who were now girls—me included—wore heels. We would miss the first hour, but if everything went as planned, we would be back in our old lives before that became a problem. There was no school bus to take us. Ms. Drew, George and Danny had cars, so we agreed to caravan to the courts.

I felt as if I was being driven to my own execution. If Teresa and Darla hadn’t been in the back seat with us, I think I would have snuggled against Danny for comfort. Why had I agreed to do this? Would my

dark green dress look good with oak leaves? Yes, I had gone back to March's and bought the dress. It really did look good on me.

I had not remembered until I walked into Courtroom A, the trappings of power evident there. When I had first been ushered into the room as Jace, I had been too relieved to have survived to really look around. And when I had left, my body changed beyond recognition, I had been too frightened and confused to appreciate my surroundings. Now though, I was alert as I observed the room with its walnut wainscoting and finely finished bench complete with an emblem in gold that showed what appeared to be an eagle in a fierce pose, but an eagle more powerful and fearsome than I had ever imagined possible. I nearly cringed.

Officer Mercer stood before the Judge, a leash in his hand. At the end of the leash was a small white poodle, a pink bow in its hair.

"Good day to you, Mr. Madison," the Judge intoned with what I had come to recognize from the speech patterns of myself and my friends as an Oklahoma twang. I wondered who he had been talking to; then I realized he had been speaking to the dog.

"Come, Fifi," Officer Mercer said with a gentle tug on the leash. The frightened dog looked around the room furtively before being led from the courtroom, forced to run on its short legs just to keep up with the officer's long strides. I felt bile rising in my throat. I might be joining Fifi in the annual Ovid Dog Show if there was one.

"Well," the Judge drawled, as if noticing our little band for the first time, "I thought your tour of City Hall was last Friday."

Without preamble, Ms. Drew stepped in front of the bench. "I think you know why we're here."

I winced when she failed to add "Your Honor." The Judge with a frown noticed, too.

"I would advise you to be careful, Ms. Drew," the Judge said. His voice was calm and even, but I nearly cringed at the barely hidden menace in his tone.

“I am not Ms. Drew,” she said defiantly. “I am Chip Jessup, assistant football coach at Northwest Missouri State.”

“I will grant that is who you were,” the Judge agreed, “but when you came to Ovid, that identity became meaningless. This is who you are now. You have no choice. You must either accept it or suffer the consequences.”

“We demand that you change us back!” she said stridently. “You had no right to do this to us.”

The Judge turned with piercing eyes to the rest of us. “Does she speak for all of you?”

We’re a team, I kept telling myself. I won’t be the one to break ranks. I looked at my former teammates. Who would be the first to deny it? I cast what I hoped was a subtle look at Darla. She wanted so badly to be the girl she had become, but she said nothing. She did look very uncomfortable, though, but almost all of us did. In fact, I noticed that only Ms. Drew and Jennifer showed any true revolutionary spirit when facing the Judge. Could it be, I wondered, that the rest of us had begun to settle into our new identities? Surely some of the other former young men who were now younger girls were unhappy with their new roles. And the former Wild Bill, his potential football career squashed—surely he must want to return to his former life, I thought. Yet they all looked as uncomfortable as Darla—and I—felt.

“Very well,” the Judge said with obvious disdain in his voice. “I think I will grant your request.”

Part 10

I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. A week earlier, I would have been overjoyed at the thought of returning to my old life. But now... well, now it was like a sentence of death. The hopes and dreams I had slowly developed over the last week would be dust in my hands. There would be no second chance at excelling in school, no shot at medical school, no family unblemished by marital strife, no... no Danny.

I was suddenly sitting down, my now uncomfortably large masculine body strapped into a narrow seat. Larry was sitting next to me, a look of shock on his face that must have been close to the one on my own. I heard cries from some of the others. I heard Darren's voice yell an exuberant "Yes!" Then I heard Austin howl almost in agony.

Then it happened. There was the loud pop again from the rear of the plane, followed by a collective gasp from the team. At first, the only thing that happened was that the roar of the engines was not as loud. That had not happened before, I realized. Then, the plane began to pitch wildly, throwing me forward against the seat in front of me. I felt an unexpected pain in my nose as it struck the seat. I think it was broken. Then, we pitched back, and I was thrown back into my own seat.

"Strap in!" the pilot's voice suddenly came through the public address system. Her voice held an edge of terror. "And brace for an emergency landing."

There would be no landing, I realized. The plane pitched forward again, only this time, it was a slow, almost steady maneuver, pointing the nose of the plane precipitously downward. I managed to look at Larry. Like me, he realized what was happening. There would be no miraculously safe landing in Ovid this time. There would be no second chances. In a matter of moments, we would be a grisly mass of bone and muscle, burned beyond all recognition amid the twisted wreckage of what had once been an airliner.

I wanted to cry, but Jace Stromberg hadn't cried since he was ten. I wanted to hold Larry's hand and pretend he was Danny, but Jace Stromberg wasn't a queer. He would never hold his best friend's hand.

I heard the rush of air screaming past the wounded plane and felt myself pressed further back in my seat as we plunged toward the ground. I couldn't look out the window, but I could imagine the ground coming closer and closer until...

There was darkness for a moment, and then it was light. We were back in the Ovid courtroom once more. I looked down at myself,

relieved to see a pair of breasts jutting forward bound by a dark green dress. I sighed in relief as a strand of long auburn hair slipped over my shoulder and into my line of vision. Then, through the stillness, I heard other sighs and even soft crying. Not all of the crying was coming from the girls. I couldn't help myself. I didn't care what anybody thought anymore. I pressed myself into Danny and felt joy as his strong arms wrapped around me.

"So now you know," the Judge said to us, more than a little triumph in his sonorous voice. In his hands, he held a newspaper. Although I couldn't see the masthead, I could read the headline which was much larger. TEAM DIES IN CRASH! It screamed. There was a picture of twisted wreckage, and I had no doubt that it had once been our plane.

"This is what would have happened. By now, your families would be consumed with grief. None of you would have survived."

Ms. Drew wasn't finished yet. Angrily, she countered, "But if you could do this to us, you could have saved the plane. I mean, you did save the plane, but you could have left us as we were."

"There are some cultures," the Judge explained patiently, "who believe that once you have saved someone's life, you are responsible for them."

"But not this way!" Ms. Drew insisted. "We don't want to be like this," she emphasized by pointing at her own body.

"Don't you?" he asked, his voice suddenly soft. Then, he looked right at Darla. "How about you, Ms. Hastings? I insist that you tell the truth. Do you want to be Darla Hastings?"

It was a difficult moment for her, I knew. She faced potential ridicule from people who had once been her teammates. Still, the Judge's question demanded a truthful answer, and she was up to the task.

"Yes..." she began softly. Then, more confidently, "Yes... I want to be Darla Hastings."

There was a snort from Jennifer, but the rest of us stood silently. Then, Teresa and Geena both smiled at her and each put an arm

gently around her waist.

"I see you are not alone," the Judge remarked. Then, turning to Glen, he said, "I took from you a promising future in football. Surely you must want a different fate."

To my surprise, Glen smiled. "No, I'm happy here. And you didn't take away my chance at the pros. I just won't be a quarterback."

"No?"

"No. I've already talked to the coach. Apparently my new father played quarterback in high school and wanted me to do the same. I don't have the talent for it now. But George has worked with me all week, and I found I can catch anything he throws at me. The coach has agreed to try me at wide receiver. I'll have to work at it, but I think I can make it all the way to the pros in that position."

The Judge smiled. It was the answer he had sought. Then turning Ms. Drew, he observed, "It would seem that not all of your team objects to its fate."

For once, Ms. Drew was speechless.

"Then I think I must take some actions as a result of this incident," the Judge told us. "Henceforth, all residents of Ovid will be unable to speak of the magical nature of Ovid, except privately. That is to say, you may speak to one other person, but no longer may you discuss this business of Ovid in open forum. I think it would also be wise if I limited your ability to discuss my nature and the nature of my associates. Darla, you all know who I am. Would you speak my real name, please?"

"Yes, Your Honor," she said formally. "You are Ju... J..."

"Thank you, my dear," he told her, smiling. "I think that settles most of our business here today. However, I must still deal with the ringleaders. Ms. Drew, you and Ms. Tilton, Mr. Hartman, and Ms. Wallace will remain. The rest of you can go."

Danny looked as stricken at not being singled out as I was at being named. "Your Honor," he pleaded. "I would like to remain as well."

The Judge frowned. "Mr. Mitchell, this is not something that concerns you. You were only Ms. Wallace's driver. Believe me when I tell you that you do not want to be part of what is about to happen."

I felt bile rising in my throat again. Why had I allowed this to happen? I had actually become happy with my new life. Now, I would stand in judgement. I looked at Danny and felt moisture forming in my eyes.

"I'm not leaving," Danny insisted, looking at me with concern. "I..."

What he was about to say was suddenly cut off, for Danny and all of my teammates whose names the Judge had not called suddenly vanished from the room without a trace. I thought of running, but then I saw the door barred by the ever-present Officer Mercer.

"Now, to business," the Judge said with a wicked little smile. There we were, the four of us standing in judgement before a being whose identity we could no longer discuss among ourselves, but whose powers were obvious.

As I looked at my fellow defendants—for that is what we were whether we realized it or not—I saw I was not the only one who feared what was about to happen. While Ms. Drew remained in a defiant pose, Jennifer emulating her, Barry looked as nervous as I felt. I was sure now that I had been right about Barry. He wasn't one of the ringleaders of our little attempted rebellion any more than I was. He was merely a young man in love. It was a testimony to his love of Jennifer that he stood accused with us. And as I had noted before, Jennifer remained oblivious to it.

"Where to begin?" the Judge asked himself. He looked back and forth, staring for a moment at each of us before stopping at Jennifer. "And you, Ms. Tilton. Let's start with you. You appear to be Ms. Drew's closest conspirator. Why is that?"

It wasn't the question she had anticipated. Finally, she responded, "Coach Jessup is our leader. Since Coach Wallace doesn't remember who he was, Coach Jessup is in charge."

"I see," the Judge drawled. "So do you admire Coach Jessup, or are

you just being a good little soldier following orders?”

“I admire him!” Jennifer insisted.

The Judge turned to Ms. Drew. “So she admires you. How commendable. Do you think she would admire you if she knew about Susan?”

Ms. Drew turned suddenly pale. “Susan... Susan has nothing to do with this.”

Who was Susan?

“Quite the contrary. I even gave you ‘Susan’ as a middle name. I thought it was appropriate. Alicia Sue Drew. Alicia for your mother and Susan for your ex-wife.”

“That’s all in the past,” Ms. Drew mumbled. She refused to look the Judge in the eye.

“That isn’t what Kimberly would say,” the Judge said harshly.

Ms. Drew, the reader of our little hopeless revolt was suddenly speechless.

The Judge turned to Jennifer. “Ms. Tilton, let me tell you a few things about your leader here. When he was young, he watched his mother Alicia, suffer beating after beating from his father. He was a big man while she... well, she was about the size of our Ms. Drew here. Fortunately for her, his father died when he was twelve. So the beatings stopped, but not the abuse. Chip was well named. He was a chip off the old block. He took over where his father had left off. Not physically so much, but mentally. He terrorized his mother and two younger sisters until he went away to school.

“The interesting thing is that he could be charming if he put his mind to it. He was certainly charming when he met and courted Susan. She became his wife. Then, the pattern of abuse learned so well from his father resurfaced. Only Susan wasn’t like his mother. She tolerated the verbal abuse for a few months, but the first time he got physical—breaking two ribs I might add—she left him. His more recent girlfriend, Kimberly, has been relatively lucky. She has just been slapped around

a bit—so far.”

Jennifer was dumbfounded. Her hero was not who she thought he was. “Is this true?” she asked softly.

The fire was back in Ms. Drew’s eyes. “It wasn’t like that. Mother was weak. All women are weak. They’re just made that way. And it would have worked for Susan and me if she had just listened to me. And Kimberly is different. She and I had a good thing going. She’s learning her place. Men are strong, so it’s their job to be in charge. A family isn’t a democracy any more than a football team is. Darren, what would the team be like if we had to vote on everything? A family is the same way.”

Jennifer looked at Ms. Drew as if she had suddenly sprouted horns and a pointed red tail. I knew a little about her former family. They were good people—a loving family. I didn’t know what Jennifer’s family was like. I had heard her new father was an important man in Ovid—a bank president—but that was all I knew. I imagined Jennifer would have no use for a wife beater.

“It seems you have lost a disciple, Ms. Drew,” the Judge observed.

“I... I...” She fell silent. She wasn’t stupid. I think she realized in that moment just how foolish her own defense had sounded.

“Still,” the Judge continued, “I feel I have been remiss in my sentencing of you. A change is certainly in order.” He spoke again the strange words he had spoken when we were transformed, and in seconds, she shrank before our eyes. I had been so busy worrying about my own transformation before that I had not had the chance to closely observe the process. It was like watching a computerized morph. Her body seemed to collapse in on itself until she was as small as a three-year-old child. In fact, she was a three-year-old child, tiny, pretty, and undeniably female in a frilly pink dress. She retained all of her Indian features, though. She looked down at herself and uttered a sorrowful wail.

“You are still Alicia Sue Drew,” the Judge told her. “Your mother, Judy Drew is a young divorcee left to raise her daughter by herself. She is a

strong woman and a good mother. I think this will give you the opportunity to learn just how strong a woman can be. You will learn by example this time.”

As if on cue, Vera March stepped in from the direction of the Judge’s chambers. The Judge smiled at her and said, “Vera, would you be kind enough to see that our newest Ms. Drew gets over to day-care? Her mother will be picking her up after school.”

Vera March smiled, taking the little girl’s unresisting hand. “Of course, Your Honor.”

“And now to the two of you,” the Judge said, turning his attention to Jennifer and Barry. I saw Barry’s hand move slightly, as if he wanted to take Jennifer’s hand, but it went back down again as he thought better of it. The gesture was not lost on the Judge.

“Do the two of you have anything to say for yourselves?” he asked.

This time, it was Barry who spoke. “Your Honor, we’re sorry. We didn’t realize what was going on here.”

And you still don’t, I thought. None of us really did. The Judge had neatly deflected Ms. Drew’s contention that, given his powers, he could have easily saved us without transforming us. But I wasn’t about to ask for an explanation now. My turn in the docket was still coming.

Jennifer, for once, said nothing. She realized she had already said too much. Maybe there was hope for her yet.

The Judge looked at them evenly for a few moments. “Very well. I think you’ve learned a lesson today. However, our Ms. Drew could never have organized your group without your participation, so at least a mild punishment is in order.”

I watched in horror as they, too, began to shrink, but this time, the process stopped before the change was as radical. Both were a little shorter, and I noticed that Jennifer’s breasts had shrunk in size as well. Barry was dressed as before, in a sport coat, but the coat was slightly smaller now and his shoulders less broad. Jennifer had been given a change of wardrobe. She now wore a short plum-colored skirt

and a white blouse ruffled with lace. She had flats on her feet and white hose. She looked very young and innocent, but with the promise of considerable beauty when she was a little older.

"You have both lost two years," the Judge explained. "Now, you are in the eighth grade. That will give each of you a little chance to grow up."

It would also mean they would be too young to drive and in a different school from the rest of us for the remainder of the year, I realized.

"Officer Mercer!"

"Yes, Your Honor?"

"Would you be so good as to drive these two youngsters home?" the Judge asked, although it was, of course, an order.

"Of course, Your Honor."

He waited until they were gone before turning to me.

"And now, Ms. Wallace, we come to you."

My heart was beating faster and my palms were wet. To say I was terrified was an understatement. For some reason, I had been saved for last. I was the last course in the Judge's little banquet of transformation. I was the coffee and sweets whose aftertaste he would take away from the table. It wasn't a happy thought.

"Ms. Wallace, I am perhaps most disappointed in you."

The words were like a death sentence.

"Your Honor..." I began, barely able to speak. Now I knew how Dorothy felt standing before the Wizard of Oz.

"Don't bother with explanations," he said with a dismissive wave of his hands. "When it comes to humans. I am often disappointed. Just tell me one thing: whatever possessed you to follow a blind fool like Jessup?"

"Follow?" I said stupidly. "But he was our coach."

The Judge stared at me. "I expected you to be their leader. I even

gave you the last name of Wallace, like your coach. You have the required talent. You are intelligent, eloquent, and persuasive. With you to lead them, this incident would never have happened.”

“Me? But I wasn’t the coach,” I protested. My fear was suddenly replaced by anger I barely repressed. If I was to be in charge, why was I a student? Shouldn’t I have been the teacher? I began to realize that the Judge, for all his power, did not understand some things about humans.

He confirmed that when he asked, “What difference did that make?”

“It made all the difference in the world,” I explained. I tried to think of something he might understand. “Look, Your Honor, if you and some of your fellow... beings suddenly transformed into mortals, who would be in charge?”

“We have done so,” the Judge admitted, “and I, of course, I was in charge.”

“Why?”

I had almost gone too far. “That is none of your concern, young lady!” he blustered.

“I’m sorry, Your Honor,” I said, soothing him with as respectful a tone as I could muster, “but I just wanted to point out that you would still be in charge because all of your... associates would know who you really were.”

The Judge seemed to relax a little, and some of the building fire in his eyes receded. “I see.” Then, the anger rising again, he asked, “You would equate the power of an assistant coach with my power?”

“Of course not,” I hastened to clarify, “but he was still an authority figure to us. A team learns to follow a coach like soldiers follow a general. If you don’t follow orders, you won’t be part of the team.”

“But humans question their orders all the time,” he pointed out.

“Yes,” I agreed, “but not when the good of the team is at stake.”

He was silent for a moment. In that short time, I knew my fate was

being determined. At last he spoke. “Ms. Wallace, you have been a girl for a week. What would you say if I offered you the opportunity to be male once more?”

I nearly gasped. Had he made the offer only a few days earlier, I would have jumped at the opportunity. Now, though, I wasn’t so sure. Samantha Wallace had a future that Jason Stromberg did not. And, if I was to be completely honest with myself, I had become comfortable being her.

“I would... respectfully decline the offer,” I admitted.

He nodded. Apparently, I had given him the answer he had wanted. “Do you love Mr. Mitchell?”

Did I love Danny? “Oh, yes!” I answered, the lack of hesitation surprising even me.

“Then you may go, Ms. Wallace.”

At first, I couldn’t believe what I had just heard. I stood dumbstruck.

The Judge had been looking down when he had ordered me to go, but now he looked up at me. “Is there something wrong with your hearing, Ms. Wallace? I said you could go.”

I still couldn’t believe my good fortune. I turned quickly, almost stumbling as I had forgotten that I was wearing heels, and rushed from the courtroom. As I opened the door, I thought I heard a soft call from the Judge. “Live well, Samantha,” was what I thought I heard, but I wasn’t sure.

“Sam!”

It was Danny. I threw myself into his arms, unable to hold back tears of joy.

“What happened?” he asked softly as he held me, his face in my hair.

“The Judge ch...” I wanted to tell Danny all about it, but my voice caught. The, for the first time, I looked around. The rest of my teammates—my friends—were there, too, standing to one side but still in earshot. I would be able to tell them later, but only one at a time.

The Judge's new rules would make it impossible to challenge him as we had ever again.

"I'll tell you later," I whispered.

"Come on, lovebirds," George called out. "We're late for school."

We were. And I had so many things to do. There were tests to study for and papers to write. I had to excel or I'd never be a doctor. Then, there was the party that weekend I had to get ready for, and I didn't have a thing to wear...

"So the Judge is not omnipotent!" Susan said with a little smile as the room came back into focus.

"Oh, he's omnipotent," Diana laughed. "He just isn't omnipresent."

"What's the difference?" I asked, taking a needed sip of my Diet Coke.

"Omnipotent means supremely powerful," Susan explained.

"And omnipresent means being in all places at the same time," Diana finished for her. "Humans still have the ability to confound us at times. It's that 'free will' you humans are always babbling about." Then, with a sly grin, she added, "Of course that's what makes you all so entertaining, too."

"Well, here's to the Judge," Susan said, raising her glass. "May he remain omnipotent but never omnipresent, especially when Steven and I are in bed together."

We giggled as we joined her in her toast.

"I just have one question," I said. "If you can show these stories in our minds just like I can, why did the Judge need me? You weren't even in the courtroom when they were transformed."

"Wasn't I?" she asked coyly. "To answer your question, though, I don't like being pinned down in Ovid. Sam's case was special because there were so many transformees all at once. I wanted to be a part of

that exercise. It was one of the few I ever observed.”

“Wait a minute,” Susan mused. “You were one of the students, weren’t you?”

As an answer, Diana’s form suddenly blurred. In a few seconds, an attractive young brunette of perhaps fifteen or sixteen stood before us. “Hi, Sam,” she said with a giggle. “Do you want to go shopping with me?”

“Jessica!” Susan and I exclaimed in unison.

“That’s right,” she laughed. “I was Jessica for most of that week. It gave me a chance to observe all the team. Then, the day before they all confronted the job, the Judge changed a newcomer to Ovid into Jessica. Since she didn’t remember who she was before, Sam never noticed.”

Then as quickly as she had become Jessica, she returned to her previous form. “Now,” Diana said primly, “both of you looked as if you had something interesting to tell me.”

“We didn’t say that!” I protested.

Diana gave me a mock frown. “Honey, I’m a goddess. Now both of you—what gives?”

I nodded at Susan. “If you have something, you go first.”

Susan shook her head. “Oh, no. You go first.”

“Ladies!” Diana cried in frustration. “Why don’t you go together?”

“Well, all right,” I agreed, and seeing Susan nod, we looked at each other. “One... Two... Three!”

“I’m pregnant!” I declared, taking a moment to realize that I hadn’t said it alone. Susan and I looked at each other with disbelief.

Diana roared with laughter.

Ovid IX: The Private Eye

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I felt as if I was running a nursery. Court had been in session all morning, and Ovid now had four new children—real children, that is—who needed to be integrated into their new lives. It wouldn't have been so bad if they had all been part of one trial, but the four children were the result of three separate trials. Where four separate men had once been, there were now four children, ranging in ages from six to twelve. Two were boys and the other two were girls. Only one of the girls remembered who she had been before, and she wasn't very happy. They never are at first.

I certainly wasn't happy that fall day nearly a year before when I exchanged my life as a college student—a male college student—for the life of a wife, mother, and administrative assistant to Ovid's most powerful individual—the Judge. Of course, now I wouldn't trade back for anything. Even on tough mornings like this one, I really enjoyed my job. And I enjoyed being Cindy Patton, wife and mother of two—well two and a fraction—children. No matter that those two children had been fraternity brothers of mine. So was my husband for that matter. None of them remembered their previous lives, though. But the one growing inside me now would be a whole new person.

I experienced a warm glow just thinking about that as I sat down at my desk. Funny, but as a male, I never thought much about having children, and of course I never thought I'd be bearing one. Now, though, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. It had to be the hormones.

I looked down at myself. Nothing showed yet. But the doctor had assured me that I was most certainly pregnant. Of course, it wasn't all joy. At times, I was quite frightened about being pregnant. But I was assured by other women that it was natural. Besides, they reminded me, I had already had twins. If only they knew the truth—that I had

never actually borne the twins in spite of what most people in Ovid remembered.

“Can we put a roadblock outside of town?” a woman’s voice muttered from behind me. “I don’t want one more speeder to defend for a month.”

Susan Jager plopped down in the chair in front of my desk. As the official Public Defender for those who appeared before the Judge, she had reason to be more tired than I did. The best she could hope for with her clients appearing before the Judge was a promise of a happy new life. In my experience, no one had ever left the Judge’s court as the same person who had entered. And in addition to the caseload the Judge gave her, she had her own clients as well. Besides, pregnant women get tired easily, and Susan was as pregnant as I was. A fine pair we made—two former men now on our way to being natural mothers.

“It wouldn’t do any good,” I laughed. “If Officer Mercer put up a roadblock, we’d probably just have another plane fall out of the sky.”

She sighed, “True. Is it my turn to buy lunch?”

“No, it’s mine!” a cheerful voice called out from nowhere. Then, with a pop, a willowy redhead was sitting on my desk, her short green skirt a perfect match for her bright green eyes.

“Hello, Diana,” I said calmly. I had seen too many similar entrances from the goddess Diana to be surprised at her dramatic entrance.

“Just Di today,” she explained with an Irish lilt in her voice. “Di Mooney. I thought I’d buy the two of you lunch before popping off to the old sod.”

“Business in Ireland?” Susan asked.

“Funny business,” she said with a grin. “His name is Sean. After the last few days, I need a vacation.”

I suspected most of the gods felt the same way. It had been a tense few days in Ovid. Now, though, the mood was much more relaxed after the events of the weekend. The Judge had been in a fine mood

all week and planned to be gone for the next few days. Our session that morning—Tuesday—had been the last planned for the week. Most of the other deities had taken some time off as well, from what I had heard.

“And you just wanted to buy us lunch before you left,” I said. I knew, of course, that it wasn’t the only reason for her largesse.

“Well...” she began, pursing her beautiful lips, “I suppose I would like to hear the whole story before I go.”

“So would I for that matter,” Susan chimed in. “Vera over at March’s said something about it yesterday. I guess I missed all the excitement last weekend.”

“Yes, she was here for the story yesterday morning,” I explained. “In fact, just about every deity in town has been in for this story.” That was unusual, too. Most of the gods didn’t bother to come to me for the tales. I suppose after a few thousand years, tales of the Judge’s transformations were a little dull. Of course, Diana never seemed to tire of them.

“Shouldn’t we have lunch first?” I suggested coyly. “After all, Susan and I are both eating for two now.”

“Only if you’ll settle for fast food,” Diana answered, equally coy.

“But we go to the Greenhouse if you hear the story first?” I bargained.

“Sure.”

I smiled, relaxing into my trance-like state. “Okay, girls, here we go...”

There were times, I thought with a heavy sigh as I stared at my incoming basket, that I wished the life of a private detective was a little more like it was in the old Sam Spade movies. I tried to imagine myself in a wilted suit, my tie loose as I sat with my feet on the desk, tempted by the open bottle of bourbon in my lower desk drawer. Maybe there could be some brassy jazz playing in the background, drowning out the din of afternoon Los Angeles traffic two floors down

on a warm summer day.

The only thing in the real world that matched my fantasy was that it was a warm summer day. In fact, it was hot and humid, but that was outside. In my office, it was cool and dry as the sound of the air conditioning hummed over the background music which sounded like the elevator music version of something ELO did back in the early eighties. Outside my window was Chicago, not Los Angeles, and even if the window hadn't been sealed shut, I don't know how much of the traffic noise I could hear on Wacker Drive some twenty stories down.

As for my attire, I wore a navy double-breasted blazer and charcoal gray slacks, and everything was neatly pressed and stylish, as befitted an associate of Charles McKenzie and Associates, one of Chicago's premier private detective agencies. And there was certainly no bottle of bourbon in my desk drawer. If there were, I would probably have been fired in a heartbeat. That was okay, though, I was strictly a beer drinker, and never at work.

Actually, I wasn't really the Same Spade type anyhow. One of the reasons I had gone with the McKenzie offer when I left the Chicago police force was that they specialized in business clients rather than the more tawdry divorce work of some of the other firms. Oh, we did a little divorce work, but most of our clients were the various law firms that populated the Loop—some of them in our building—and insurance companies.

Actually, our largest insurance client owned the building we were in. It was at One Wacker Drive. Although not as prestigious as some other buildings, it was a good address. It looked good on the business card. And from Charles McKenzie's office, you could see most of the major buildings in the Loop. Even my humble office looked down on the Chicago River with a nice view of Marina Towers. And if I wanted that jazz music, House of Blues was just a few blocks away.

My only real complaint with the job was the paperwork. It was almost as bad as working as a cop. It seemed as if I sat behind the desk covering my butt (and the firm's butt) with paper at least two hours for every hour I spent in the field.

“Jeff, do you have a minute?”

I looked up suddenly at the sound of Charles McKenzie’s voice. I hadn’t even heard him at the door. “Sure, Mac,” I replied, happy for any excuse to avoid paperwork. Besides, Mac was a good boss. He treated his associates more like human beings than many of the PI firms did—or so I had heard. That didn’t mean Mac was a soft touch. He could be hard as nails when he needed to be. Like most of us in the firm, he had come up through the ranks as a cop. More than one person had been fooled by his silver hair and fatherly appearance.

Mac eased into my office, followed by another man who I didn’t know. The stranger was about as tall as Mac and me—six-one or so—and looked to be just a shade into his forties. He was balding slightly and had the suntanned look of a man who spent time out of doors. His suit was dark and expensive, and looked rather lawyerly. If I had been a betting man, I would have bet that he was indeed a lawyer, and a successful one at that. I wouldn’t have been surprised to find that his tan came from sailing his own boat on Lake Michigan.

“Jeff Riley, meet Franklin Ridgeway,” Mac said formally. I rose and took Ridgeway’s hand. “Mr. Ridgeway is an attorney.”

“The Franklin Ridgeway of Block, Patterson and Ridgeway?” I asked, knowing the answer. Surely there could only be one Franklin Ridgeway. The man whose hand I was shaking was one of the most prominent attorneys in Chicago. He had been involved in a number of high profile cases, and almost always on the winning side. He represented some of the top companies in Chicago.

“That’s right,” he acknowledged with a firm grip. We looked each other straight in the eye as we shook hands. Looking into his dark brown eyes was almost like looking into an abyss. They say the eyes are the windows to the soul. If that’s the case, I thought Franklin Ridgeway’s soul had to be darker than the pit of Hell. But, of course, he was a lawyer.

I motioned to the two chairs before my desk. When we were seated, Mac began, “Mr. Ridgeway has an assignment he would like us to

undertake.”

“I see,” I said as noncommittally as possible. I had assumed that was the case. He didn’t just come up to see the view from my window. The fact that the great Franklin Ridgeway had made the pilgrimage all the way over to our office from his lakefront offices meant that this assignment was going to be a doozy.

“Mr. Riley...”

“Jeff,” I interjected.

Ridgeway smiled. “Yes, Jeff then. I represent a group of investors with large international interests.”

“Who are they?” I asked bluntly. I saw Mac grimace. ‘Sorry, Mac,’ I thought, ‘but I like to know who’s holding the leash.’

Ridgeway didn’t miss a beat. He didn’t even blink. “I’m afraid the identity of my clients must remain confidential. I have been authorized to assure you though that they are not involved in any illegal activities, nor will they ask you to do so. I have a sworn affidavit on their behalf that verifies this.”

I settled back in my chair, striking what I hoped was a sceptical pose. “So what do your clients want?”

“One of their associates embezzled a large amount of money from them last year.”

“How large is large?” I asked.

“Thirty million dollars,” he replied without hesitation.

I nodded. “That certainly is a large amount of money.”

“And they want it back.”

“I’m sure they do,” I agreed. “But there’s more, isn’t there? Thirty million is enough to get Federal and state authorities on the case, even if he’s had a year to hide. Why involve a private investigator?”

“I told you he was sharp,” Mac said to Ridgeway with a proud smile.

“Yes,” Ridgeway agreed without real conviction. “I’m sure that’s why

my clients specified Mr. Riley—Jeff—for this job.”

I was suddenly curious. “Your clients specified me specifically? Why? Do I know them?”

“No,” Ridgeway explained, shifting a little uncomfortably, as if he had been charged with explaining something he didn’t fully understand himself. “My clients are most insistent that you handle this matter for them. They didn’t explain why. I, of course, checked you out on my own. You had a promising career with the Police Department. You were a homicide detective.”

It wasn’t a question, but I said, “That’s right.”

“And yet you gave it all up when...”

“Right again,” I said, cutting him off. There were some subjects not open for discussion. That was one of them. He picked up on it and moved on.

“My clients have reason to believe that their associate fled and is currently residing in Oklahoma.”

I’m sure I gave a surprised look. Embezzlers with thirty million to throw around generally leave for some other part of the world—someplace where extradition is difficult if not impossible. Then they cover their tracks, bribe a few local officials, hire a private guard or two and live off the interest. Let me see, thirty million at eight percent a year is over two million. Most good embezzlers can live on that.

“Why Oklahoma?” I asked, genuinely curious for the first time.

“I honestly don’t know,” Ridgeway replied. When a lawyer says ‘honestly,’ look out. But for some reason, I believed him. He seemed as genuinely puzzled as I was. This case was beginning to sound interesting.

“Okay,” I said, “let’s say the embezzler is in Oklahoma. It’s a big place—too big for one private detective to find him. Why not just tell the authorities? At last check, there were plenty of law enforcement officers in Oklahoma.”

Ridgeway was becoming uncomfortable. Obviously, he had dangled big bucks in front of Mac, and so as the hired underling, I was supposed to smile and take orders. In the three years I had been in Mac's company, I had never been that sort of person. Mac knew it, but obviously Ridgeway didn't.

"Look, Jeff," Ridgeway began with a sigh, "I don't pretend to understand why my clients do the things they do. All I can tell you is that they are very successful, and they are legitimate. They seem to have insights that have made them wealthy beyond anything you can imagine. And yet they still manage to keep their names out of the newspapers. Now, there's something in Oklahoma that they want handled, and they want you to handle it. Besides, the police haven't found him in a year, according to my clients."

"So I'm supposed to go charging off to Oklahoma and bring back their embezzler," I surmised. Who did they think I was? The Lone Ranger?

Ridgeway shook his head. "No, you don't have to bring him back. They just want you to finger him."

"I thought you said he was an associate of theirs," I pointed out. "Surely they know what he looks like."

"He looks like this," Ridgeway said, opening a file and passing a photo to me. It wasn't a terribly good photo. It showed three men displaying the results of a day's fishing. The man in the middle, the tallest, was circled. He looked a little like Tom Sellick with curly dark hair and a moustache, well trimmed, and an easy smile. I noticed he had the most fish, too. "But he may not look like that now."

So he had invested in a makeover, I thought. Try a little plastic surgery here and there. Maybe shave off the moustache or grow a beard. Wear contacts to change his eye color. Still, he couldn't change his height. He looked to be about six-two or so. He shouldn't be that hard to find.

There was still something I wasn't being told, but I could live with that. It was part of the challenge. Like most good detectives, I liked a good puzzle. Back in my homicide days, I had quite a reputation for putting

together vague clues and coming up with a murderer. After a few successes, I seemed to get all the really hard cases. I even managed to solve a majority of them. Of course, there was an eventual cost, one that drove me from the force, but there was nothing I could do about that now.

So when I left the force, what else could I do but become a private cop? The Rileys had been cops ever since they had immigrated to Chicago back in the last century. It was in my blood. I just couldn't be a homicide detective after...

"All you have to do is find him. Others will bring him back," Ridgeway was explaining.

So okay, I was curious. In fact, I was more than curious. I was mystified. Our investigations did not come cheaply, and however much was being offered, it was enough to have Mac excited. My services had been specifically requested, and I couldn't for the life of me imagine why. And all of this just to identify—identify; not detain—an embezzler who didn't even have sense enough to leave the country.

"When do I start?" I asked, watching with faint amusement as both Mac and Ridgeway seemed to relax a little.

Ridgeway pulled a packet out of his folder. "You start today. There's an American flight to Tulsa from O'Hare later this afternoon. We've made hotel reservations for you tonight in Tulsa. Then, tomorrow, you drive along the last known route of our embezzling friend. There's a map in the packet of where you need to concentrate your search. My clients seem to be certain he's somewhere in the area on that map."

"How long do I have?" I asked, accepting the packet. I took a moment to look at the map. It was a detail of an area east of Tulsa and north of Muskogee. I had never been in that part of the country, but I at least recognized the names of those towns. My only real knowledge of that part of the country came from watching Twister.

"As long as you need," he replied, rising to his feet. "A phone number is in the packet. You are to call it when you've identified our target."

“Is it your phone number?” I asked.

That earned me a small smile. “No.”

Mac ushered him out while I inspected the packet. When Mac returned, he was still all smiles. “Great work, Jeff. You really impressed him, and Ridgeway doesn’t impress easily.”

“Neither do I,” I told him as he plopped back down into the chair he had vacated a short time before. “Something about this smells, Mac.”

He began to laugh. “I wouldn’t worry about it. Ridgeway might be a snake, but his record is clean.”

“He reminds me of Al Pacino in the Devil’s Advocate,” I muttered. “I’m surprised his suit doesn’t smell of brimstone. I tell you, Mac, something about this isn’t right.”

He got a little more serious as his body tensed. “What do you mean?”

“Well, for starters, why hire us? This isn’t the type of case we would normally take on.”

“No,” Mac agreed, “but now I have the talent on staff to track someone down—you. After all, you are the cop who tracked down Louie Capella.”

I shifted uncomfortably. It was a matter I didn’t like to be reminded of. The look in Mac’s eyes told me he already regretted mentioning it to me. Still, I answered him. “Louie Capella was hiding out right here in Chicago. He and I grew up here. Finding him was like playing hide and seek in my old neighborhood. I knew all the good hiding places. The only thing I know about Oklahoma is that it’s north of Texas.”

“Eastern Oklahoma is a lot like downstate Illinois,” Mac explained. “It’s mostly low hills and farm land. The further east you go, the more hills and trees you see.”

“So how far east in Oklahoma am I supposed to go?” I asked, slumping down in my chair with resignation.

“About as far east as you can go it appears,” Mac answered with a smile. He knew I was intrigued with the case. He had seen me like this

before.

“One question though, Mac: why Oklahoma?”

Mac frowned. “What do you mean?”

I leaned forward and said, “Look, suppose you stole thirty million dollars from somebody. Where would you go?”

Mac thought for a moment. The idea actually seemed to bring a little smile to his face. Well, we all have our little fantasies. “I don’t know,” he finally admitted. “I’d probably try for South America. There are plenty of places to go there to avoid extradition.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “There are some other places in the Middle East, and there’s always Cuba and North Korea, but they aren’t exactly hospitable to Americans—even Americans with money. South America is where I would head, too. The point is I would get out of the country as quickly as possible.”

“Maybe this guy isn’t that bright,” Mac suggested.

I sneered and leaned back in my chair. “Come on, Mac. He was smart enough to steal thirty million dollars. Guys that smart don’t stick around, especially for a year. You’re acting as if he’s some kind of a moron who robs a convenience store, then leaves his wallet on the counter for the police to find.”

Mac looked a little uncomfortable. He saw where this was leading.

“You don’t think there is any thirty million dollars.”

“What did they offer, Mac? A ten percent finder’s fee?”

Mac squirmed in his chair. “Eight percent,” he murmured softly.

“You should have held out for ten,” I told him. “Even at that, I hope there’s a minimum fee if no money is recovered, because I think that’s all we’re going to get.”

“There is,” Mac told me, “but why are you so sure there’s no money here?”

“Because the only way Ridgeway’s clients would be coming to us

instead of pressing the authorities is if the money was dirty,” I explained confidently. “Ridgeway is too good a lawyer to get mixed up in dirty money. He doesn’t need to. His client list looks like the Who’s Who of Chicago. He may even know that there isn’t any money to be found. In fact, I suspect that’s the case. A year has gone by, so our friend has had plenty of time to hide the money. His clients aren’t after the money; they’re after the man. And whatever he did, it isn’t something they can count on the authorities to be concerned about.”

“Even if you’re right, we still get a good fee,” Mac pointed out. “I still expect you to go to Oklahoma.”

“Oh, I’ll go,” I said with a chuckle. “If for no other reason, I’m curious.”

“Well,” Mac said with a sigh as he rose to his feet, “be careful.”

“I always am,” I replied. “Don’t worry about that.”

After running home to pack, then fighting afternoon Chicago traffic, I barely made it to O’Hare in time to catch my plane. I was pleasantly surprised to see they had ponied up the first class fare, so I was to ride to the outback in style. A nice cold beer in hand as we reached cruising altitude, I managed to settle back and read the file on my embezzler—if that was what he was. Peter Allison had quite a résumé. He had picked up an MBA at Harvard after a liberal arts education at one of the name Eastern private schools and embarked on a career in mutual fund management. He hit the bricks running, and in his first two years, he became the most successful fund manager at Janus. He had opted three years ago to leave Janus and go to work for a private investment fund. I found it interesting that there was virtually no information about the private firm he went to work for. Apparently, his new employers valued their privacy above everything else.

Since many of the cases I had worked on since joining McKenzie had involved high finance, I was aware that this was fairly common. A hotshot fund manager would often opt to go to work for a private fund, usually getting a little piece of the action. A little piece could be worth several million in the bull market of the nineties that seemed to have no end.

So now our pal Allison was sitting on top of the world. He had no family and, unfortunately, there was very little in the file about his personal habits. I had a picture of a man who lived for his work, though. He made money. It was both his occupation and his hobby from all accounts.

The picture I was getting was not the picture of an embezzler. People embezzle because they can't make enough to fund their dirty little habits legitimately. Drugs, gambling, women (or men) are the common reasons for embezzling. Allison didn't seem to fit that profile. By all accounts, the guy made more money—both for himself and his clients—than he could ever need. Maybe he just snapped. Maybe the pressure got to be too much for him. But no, that would describe a man who would chuck it all and head for the beaches in Brazil. That isn't what Allison had done.

And that brought me back to my earlier question: why Oklahoma? According to the file, Allison was a born and bred Bostonian. He had solid if not affluent New England credentials and absolutely nothing to connect him to Oklahoma.

Well, I thought to myself, I had always liked tough cases, particularly when it involved tracking someone down. I had certainly gotten what I liked. What was the old saying? Be careful what you wish for—you might get it? I had been handed a case where nothing made sense. Then I had to track down a man with only the knowledge that he had apparently taken an escape route into the farm country of Oklahoma. To make it worse, he had apparently disguised himself, possibly by plastic surgery. If I got this guy, I was going to treat myself to a case of imported beer and a vacation. Maybe I'd do some fishing. I hadn't done that since... well, in a long time.

As the plane dropped down through the thick summer air, I got my first real glimpse of Oklahoma. Spread out below was a panorama of hills and trees I had not expected. Oh sure, there was plenty of farmland too, but I was used to the flat expanses of land around Chicago. This reminded me more of some of the hilly, forested areas in Wisconsin where I used to fish with...

With Mary.

I closed my eyes in resignation. As much as I tried to push memories of Mary—and Trisha—out of my head, I couldn't do it. I could still hear Mary on that last fateful fishing trip. I had three whole days off and we had decided to enjoy them on a fishing trip in Wisconsin. I could still hear Mary squealing with delight as a slight tug on her line became a whir of line being let out as a big one ran with it. I could still hear little Trisha laughing with glee as Mary nearly fell overboard trying to reel the monster in. I could still hear our mutual groan as the line snapped, freeing our mysterious fish to fight another day...

I was brought back to the present as the wheels of the plane touched down in Tulsa. I looked around, hoping no one had seen the tears in my eyes.

Tulsa was hot. Sure, Chicago was hot in the summer—often hot and muggy. But Tulsa brought new meaning to the word 'hot.' As I stepped out on the curb to catch a shuttle to get to my rental car, I felt as if I had stepped into an oven. I had been smart enough to dress casually, but even without a tie, I felt like I was being cooked by the blistering Southwestern sun. The humidity was high too, causing me to marvel at how so many presumed natives were bustling about in coats and ties as if it were a cool spring day. I guess it's whatever you get used to, I mused.

It was even hot the next morning when I started my pursuit of the contradictory Mr. Allison. I checked out a white Ford Taurus at Hertz and tried to get the lay of the land from the girl behind the rental desk. She shook her head when I showed her the map of the area I was heading for. "I'm from that part of the state," she told me with her soft Oklahoma twang. "There's not a whole lot out that way. It's mostly farms, small towns and such." Then she looked at me with her big brown eyes and asked, "You got some business out that way?"

"Yeah," I said in my best Phillip Marlowe voice, "I gotta meet a guy out there—about business."

She looked at me a little oddly. Oh well. She was only about twenty or

so. Odds were she'd never even heard of Phillip Marlowe—or Humphrey Bogart for that matter. What was this world coming to?

An hour later, I was east of Tulsa off the interstate and cruising the back roads of Oklahoma. According to the map, my fugitive could be anywhere along this part of my route. The problem was there wasn't anywhere to look, unless he was hiding under a pile of hay or in the middle of a cornfield. I hadn't seen anything but farmland for the last twenty miles. My plan had been to check with local police departments—to see if anyone fitting Allison's description had moved in over the last few months. A single city-type guy would stand out in a small town—even with plastic surgery. But there were no towns in sight, and many of the farmhouses I had seen were deserted. Apparently, like Illinois, the small family farm was disappearing as farmers cultivated more and more acres with less and less people.

It was odd. I hadn't even seen a single billboard or a road sign. I assumed I was still on the right road, for I hadn't seen any junctions indicating I had left my highway. The road was a good one—two lanes freshly black topped with a freshly painted yellow line down the center to warn against passing on the winding, hilly course.

Maybe hiding in a place like this wasn't such a bad idea, I thought. There were hills and lakes galore, and not a lot of people. If you could find a cabin buried in the woods over by one of those lakes, you might be able to hide out in plain sight for quite a while. I doubted if any of the local residents would be very helpful to someone from the big city disrupting their privacy with a search for somebody who was just minding his own business. This might turn out to be tougher than I thought, I realized.

Just when I thought I was hopelessly lost, I saw a road sign. It wasn't one of those green and white ones you see on the interstates. It was just a small sign white with black letters that proclaimed that Ovid was three miles away, presumably straight ahead.

I pulled off the road in front of the sign, searching for the Oklahoma map I had purchased at the airport to supplement the sketchy map the car rental companies give you. It was a current, highly detailed map,

but I could find no Ovid in the index. I knew roughly where I had to be, but none of the roads in that area seemed to lead to a town called Ovid. Well, it was probably just a wide spot in the road, I thought to myself. I had seen places—towns up in the woods of Wisconsin—that were nothing more than a gas station that also served as a post office and grocery store. That was probably all there was to Ovid. Still, it was a starting place. I'd pull off there, get some gas and grab a Coke, and ask about my missing man. It was nearly noon, so maybe I'd get lucky and there'd be a little café there where I could get some lunch.

When I had travelled half the distance to Ovid, I realized that it was more than a wide spot in the road. In the distance, I could see evidence of a fair-sized town. I could see trees and houses, and church steeples rising out of the artificial forest all towns create. The road was widening, becoming four lanes in width as small roadside businesses began to come into view. Apparently, the mapmakers at Gousha had screwed up. I would have bet they had gotten a few nasty notes from the Ovid Chamber of Commerce.

But where the mapmakers had failed Ovid, the weatherman had smiled upon the town. It had been hot and muggy with a serious build-up of ugly clouds as I had left Tulsa, but those clouds seemed impotent in the little valley that held Ovid. It was almost as if they were barred from entry into the valley as they roiled and blustered just beyond the low hills near Ovid, leaving the small town basking in the bright light of a summer day.

I might have been born and raised in the city, but I wasn't completely unfamiliar with small towns. Between my law-enforcement career and a passion for fishing which had often taken me to small towns in Illinois and Wisconsin, I knew small towns fairly well. Ovid was more prosperous than most of them. Everything seemed neat, clean and freshly painted, as if the town was getting ready for some big event.

Most small towns in the Midwest were in decline. Farming took an ever smaller percentage of the workforce, drying up markets for merchants in smaller communities. I had visited many small towns where half the businesses had been boarded up, or where buildings

had burned down right in the middle of the business district and weeds or empty parking lots had taken their place. Not so in Ovid. As I made my way into the heart of the town, I saw a prosperous business district. Shop windows were full of goods, parking spaces were filled with newer cars and trucks, and the people walked about with a sense of purpose.

But upon closer observation, there was something odd about the people. Some of them—most, in fact—appeared strangely transparent. No, that wasn't the right word. I couldn't see through them. It was almost as if the mind couldn't quite reconcile their existence with reality, if that makes any sense at all. It had to be a trick of the light, I thought to myself. After driving through the cloudy Oklahoma morning, perhaps the brightness of the Ovid day was playing tricks on my eyes.

With a little luck, I found what I was really looking for—the police station. First as a police officer and later as a private detective, I had learned that it was wise not to snoop in another jurisdiction without informing the authorities that I was there. It smoothed potentially ruffled feathers and often gave the local police a feeling that you were, if not part of their team, at least rooting for their side.

The Ovid Police Department made its home in City Hall. No big surprise there. In a smaller community, it was common for all city departments to be located in the same building. City Hall was fairly impressive for a small town, though. It was a two-story building faced with granite and sporting small but well-done Doric columns. The US flag hung next to the Oklahoma flags, rippling in the gentle summer breeze. There were well-tended flowers in front of the entrance. Once again, Ovid showed signs of remarkable prosperity.

As I stepped from the car, I was pleased to note that the breeze was actually a pleasant one. Oh sure, it was still hot out—as hot as I had expected. But it didn't seem quite as muggy in Ovid. Perhaps the breeze had lowered the humidity a tad. In any case, it was comfortable.

I liked Ovid—that was my first thought as I stepped out of the car. The oak trees near City Hall were green and full and looked as if they had

been there forever. The grass was green and soothing, smelling of a recent cutting. I could hear birds in the trees, gently singing to each other. What a change from the Loop! I found myself wondering where the best fishing spots might be.

“Can I help you?”

The voice was calm and pleasant, and completely unexpected. I turned suddenly, looking into the face of a police officer. He was tall and slender without being thin. His eyes were shielded by mirrored sunglasses, and the rest of his face was impassive in a way that only a police officer can manage. His gray-blue shirt was neatly pressed, as were his dark slacks. His nametag read ‘Mercer,’ and his gun belt looked almost even with his belt, but there was a sag at the holster allowing him to draw quickly if he need to. In short, he looked like a police-recruiting poster.

He was standing next to a police car. I hadn’t noticed it when I had pulled into the parking lot, but then again, I had been focused on the building. Still, I mentally kicked myself. I was usually more observant. How had I missed the car?

“I was just on my way in to your department,” I told the officer. I extended my hand. “I’m Jeff Riley. I’m a private investigator from Chicago.”

The moment of truth had arrived. How would this police officer treat me? As a contemporary? As a slime ball? It all depended upon the officer. He looked like a pro. Pros were usually willing to take you at face value. This one was no exception. Slowly but deliberately, he extended his hand.

What is the perfect handshake? I couldn’t have answered that question before I shook hands with Officer Mercer. His handshake was firm and warm, and there was something about it that made it sincere as well. He favored me with a small, tight smile. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Riley. I’m Officer Mercer. Now, what can I do for you?”

I reached in my shirt pocket and produced a picture of my fugitive. “I was hired to find this man,” I explained, handing him the picture.

“A bad one, is he?” Officer Mercer asked casually.

“Not real bad,” I replied. “Supposedly, he embezzled a large amount of money. The people who say he took it hired me to find him.”

I could feel Officer Mercer’s eyes bearing down on me. “You sound like you don’t think he took the money.”

I shrugged as casually as I could. “As I told you. I’m a private investigator. The agent who hired me has a reputation of being honest. But I’m not a police officer.”

“Any more,” Officer Mercer finished for me.

“That’s right.” No surprise there. It’s easy to spot a cop. I would have pegged Officer Mercer as a cop even if I had seen him in swim trunks at the beach.

He studied the picture. “A man like this would stand out in a crowd,” he observed.

“Yes he would,” I agreed. “He would have been through here some time during the last year. Have you seen him?”

“I don’t know anyone who looks like this,” Officer Mercer said carefully.

“It’s possible he doesn’t look like that,” I told him. He looked up at me suddenly with a quizzical expression. “He may be disguised,” I clarified, and Officer Mercer nodded.

“You’re welcome to check around,” he said at last, handing the picture back to me.

“That’s neighborly of you,” I nodded with a smile. “I’ll try not to step on any toes.”

“That would be a good idea,” he agreed. With that, he nodded, and walked into the City Hall building.

It was as much as I could reasonably hope for. I didn’t expect him to recognize the picture. That was have been too easy. But he had given me the opportunity to check around. That meant I could talk to motel

clerks, gas station employees, and waitresses along the highway. If just one of them had spotted my guy and had any idea where he had been heading for, I might have a chance of finding him. That was the way it usually worked. It was always tedious, checking with everyone who might have seen your man, but it was all part of the job.

My first stop was a motel. I could kill two birds with one stone. I'd be busy the rest of the day checking with Ovid's residents, so I might as well spend the evening. The best looking motel out on the business strip was a place called the Ovid Inn. It wasn't fancy, but I hadn't expected a Hilton.

The lobby of the Ovid Inn was as plain and simple as the rest of the place. The fanciest item in it was a sign resting on the worn registration desk that said 'Z Proctor, Proprietor.' Z Proctor was a thin fellow with even thinner hair, gray matching a small moustache. I was a little disappointed. I had hoped for one of the little weasely guys Bogart always ended up intimidating.

"Need a room?" he asked with the soft twang I had noticed from nearly everyone in Oklahoma.

"Sure do," I replied, hoping I sounded sufficiently folksy.

He seemed to be sizing me up. "Some of the beds are pretty short. I'm not sure I got one long enough for you."

"I'll make do," I assured him, pulling out a credit card and laying it on the counter.

He shrugged. "Okay, take number twenty-seven." He slid the key across the counter, scooping up my credit card all in one swift motion that would have made a magician blink twice. "You let me know if the bed's too short, though. I'll see what I can do."

"There is one thing you can do for me," I said as casually as I could.

The guy brightened. Apparently he lived to serve. "What would that be?"

I pulled the picture out of my pocket. "Ever see this guy?"

He studied the picture for a moment before saying slowly, "No, don't think so. Looks mighty tall. Friend of yours?"

"Let's just say we have mutual business associates," I replied, putting the picture away.

"Can't help you there," he said, shaking his head. "But you let me know about that bed, all right?"

Actually, I thought as I inspected the room, the bed was a little short, but it would do. The room was nothing special. I was neat and clean with cheap pine furniture and artwork that looked as if it had been left over from a starving artist's sale. It would do, though. I'd only be in Ovid for a day or so, unless I got a lead that checked out.

I checked the TV schedule to see if there were any decent detective movies on. No such luck, though. I always enjoyed them even though they were so simplistic. I mean, I realize they only have a couple of hours to tell a story, but most detective work isn't as clear cut as they show it in the movies. The detective always seems to stumble on just the right clue at just the right moment. Then, he takes a straight and obvious trail back to the killer. There are no loose ends, no hotshot lawyers to get him off on a technicality at the trial, and no bleeding heart politicians to rake him over the coals for doing his job.

I might spend weeks in this little backwater area of Oklahoma. I might show my picture of the runner a thousand times and not get one good lead. Or the next guy I talked to might lead me right to him. Oh well, I was on the clock. The agency would be paid for my work even if I turned up nothing. Our mysterious clients would have been better off going to the authorities.

I took a quick shower and got into a clean shirt and slacks. Even though the weather wasn't as hot and sticky in Ovid as it had been in Tulsa, I needed the shower and the change. It was time to sample Ovid's nightlife. No, I wasn't a partying kind of guy. I just wanted to check out places my fugitive might have patronized. Maybe he stopped for a burger, or maybe he tried one of the local bars looking for a little female companionship. Either way, he might have left a trail.

Odds were good he would have stayed on the main highway strip. That cut down the number of places I needed to check. I was hungry anyhow, so I stopped off at Rusty's Burger Barn just as the sun was going down. It was your typical small town fast food joint. I guess Ovid wasn't important enough to rate a McDonald's. Instead of golden arches and a nine gazillion served sign, the neon sign in the window of Rusty's just said 'Rusty's Best Burgers.'

I stepped in the brightly-lit building and looked around. It was neat and clean and about fifteen years out of date, just like every other small town burger joint I had ever seen. There were a few customers eating, but I got the idea Ovid was the sort of place where you went home and had dinner with the family.

There was one thing that troubled me, though. Looking around, I noticed that many of the patrons had that same oddly transparent look I had noticed when I had first arrived in Ovid. I had chalked it up to a trick of the sunlight, but there was no sun now. I don't mean I could see through those people; I couldn't—not really. But there was this odd feeling that if I really concentrated hard, I could see objects behind them. I resolved to have my eyes checked when I got back to Chicago.

"Be right with you," a perky young waitress called as I slid into a booth. She was young and brunette. I guessed her age at about nineteen or so. She was a little transparent as well, but seemed perfectly normal. It had to be my eyes.

I ordered a Rusty Burger and fries from Maxine—that was what her nametag said her name was. And I showed her the picture when she brought my food.

"I'm not sure," she said uncertainly.

My heart quickened. 'Not sure' was better than 'no.'

Then, I was doomed to disappointment as she shrugged and laughed, "We get a lot of people just passing through. I sometimes remember the cute ones, and he's cute. I don't think I remember him though. I know he's not a regular."

I had the same results everywhere I tried. There was no luck at any of the cafés or convenience stores or gas stations up and down the strip. At last, I was down to one last place: Randy Andy's. Bars didn't seem to do a thriving business in Ovid. Oh, there were a couple of little ones I had checked, but they were practically deserted. If this were Chicago, every little neighborhood bar would be doing a brisk evening business with factory workers and other working stiffs melting the heat of the day with a cold brew. Not so in Ovid, though.

Randy Andy's was the only bar on the strip big enough to show up on radar. If my fugitive was the sort of guy who might be looking for the ladies, it was the most obvious place. I had saved it until last because it was the most promising. That might seem contradictory, but I was a stranger in town. If I showed up at Randy Andy's early, I'd be met with suspicion by a group of patrons who were mostly sober and reserved. Late at night, only the serious drinkers would be left. Everybody was their friend as long as they agreed to buy a round of drinks.

There was nothing special about Randy Andy's. In fact, it was a lot quieter than I had expected. It looked as if there had been a crowd earlier from the debris a sweet young redhead was cleaning up. She didn't seem too happy about it either. A couple of guys were playing pool in back. They had an appreciative audience: two so-so looking twins who seemed more interested in the balls in their pants than the ones on the table. Other than that, there were a couple of what looked like regulars at the bar, hunched over their drinks while the ferret-like bartender pretended to wipe off the bar.

There were a couple of parties in the booths. They were all wearing bowling shirts and looked as if they had just come in to share a pitcher or two after their match. They were being served by a nice-looking waitress. She was even better looking than the redhead. She had long, dark hair and a body that was enough to make my mouth water, complete with full breasts and long, shapely legs. There was a tattoo of an eagle on one ankle, and it seemed to be in flight as she turned on her heels with a practiced move of a woman who is well aware that her every move is enough to make a grown man cry.

I had slipped into one of the booths and caught her eye. She smiled and headed my way, her short, tight red dress doing little to contain her curves. "What'll it be?" she asked in a sultry, sexy voice.

"Whatever's on tap," I replied. She nodded and turned to get my beer. I might order several just to get a view of her wonderful ass wiggling back to the bar.

When she returned with my beer, I said, "Do you have a moment?"

Her eyes drilled into me. I could see what she was thinking: just another perv who wants to make time with the waitress.

"It's nothing like that," I told her. "I just need some information."

Her eyes narrowed. "Like what's my name?"

"It's Sly," I replied, surprising her. "I heard the bartender call you that when you got my beer," I then explained.

"Look, I'm the only experienced waitress here tonight and the Borland twins and their dates," she motioned to the group at the pool table with a nod of her head, "are getting a little low on beer."

"I don't think beer is on their minds right now," I commented.

Sly turned and looked at them. The mating dance was nearly done. One of the guys had just run the table and was getting a congratulatory hand in his pants as a reward. The loser was being consoled in a similar manner. She grinned. "Maybe you're right. Okay, it's a little slow right now anyway. Besides, Misty can handle orders for a while," she said, nodding at the redhead. She sat down across from me. "Now what did you want to know?"

I wanted to know a lot of things, like if she was in a relationship, but I had a job to do. I pulled out the picture, wondering how many times I'd have to show it. "Have you seen this guy?"

She looked at the picture. I could see in a moment that she had seen him before. I couldn't believe how lucky I was. The first day and I might have a lead. I kept quiet. I could see she was deciding how to answer me. Finally, she said slowly, "I don't think so."

Her voice lied, but her eyes told the truth. What was she hiding? “Are you sure?” I asked.

She looked up at me suddenly. “Look, who are you? You’re with them, aren’t you? You know I want nothing to do with you or your people. Haven’t I made that clear to you? I’m happy here. I’ve got a life. I don’t just do this; I write books—children’s books. And...”

“Wait a minute,” I said, holding up my hand. “Slow down. Who are ‘them?’ I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve already talked to your police, so I’m not doing anything wrong here.”

If I thought she had looked surprised before, I was wrong. Now she looked surprised, her eyes and mouth wide. “You’ve talked to the police? To Officer Mercer?”

“Of course,” I confirmed. “I’m looking for a man who stole from my client. Here.” I pulled out my ID and showed it to her. She looked at my PI license and then at me. “Now, have you seen this guy?”

She thought for another moment before answering, “Yes. He was in here maybe a week or so ago.”

A week ago? But Ridgeway had said the money was taken last year. And he had indicated that the embezzler had changed his appearance. Now, this woman was telling me that he had been in the bar only a week ago with his original face.

I looked into her beautiful eyes. “Are you sure about that?”

“Of course I’m sure,” she replied angrily. “You think just because I’m a waitress in a bar that I’m some kind of a ditz?”

“Of course not,” I assured her carefully. Of course, from experience, most waitresses I had met in bars like Randy Andy’s weren’t exactly rocket scientists, but I wasn’t about to tell her that. Besides, she was right, I had to admit. I had been thinking of her as the average cocktail waitress, and that was a mistake. Even in the short time I had talked to her, I should have realized there was more to her than met the eye. Hadn’t she said that she wrote books—children’s books? I was a little rusty at this sort of an interview. I wouldn’t have made the mistake of

stereotyping her if I were still with Homicide. "It's just that I was given to understand that he might have disguised himself before then."

She studied me with a practiced eye before saying, "You know, Mr. Riley, your client may have withheld a lot of information from you."

I shifted uncomfortably. I had been thinking the same thing.

"Let me give you a piece of advice," she continued. "First, are you happy with your life?"

What a strange question. Was I? No, not really. I hadn't been happy since...

"Are you?" she pressed.

"It's all right," I answered a little defensively.

"That probably means no," she observed sagely. "But you need to know that Ovid is... different. If you stay around very long, you'll find that out. But if you are happy with your life, you need to go out to your car right now and drive out of this town and don't look back."

"Is that a threat?" I asked. "Is this guy still here in town? Is he dangerous or something?"

"He's probably here," she replied. "I don't know where, but I do know he's probably still here. And I doubt if he's dangerous. The Judge wouldn't allow that. But you'll find out all about that if you stay here."

"The Judge?" I asked. "Who is the Judge?"

"Hey, Sly, Jean and Tina are thirsty," one of the pool players called. "So are we. You can make nice with that guy later. Bring us another round."

She looked over at the foursome with an expression of mild disgust. "I have to go," she told me. "That's all I can say for now. As for the Judge, he's... well, he's the Judge."

As she got up, I touched her arm. "One more question for you, Sly," I said, not really sure why I was saying it.

"Make it quick."

“Are you happy?”

A slow smile crept across her face. “Yes, Mr. Riley, I’m happy. In fact, I’ve never been happier in my life.”

I finished the beer and left. At least I knew my runner had lit in Ovid. Now, I had to be careful. It was like when I was fishing. Once you saw there was a fish near the hook, you always had to be careful not to jerk the line. I had to become more circumspect in my questioning. Too many questions would startle my prey. As I drove back to the motel, I mapped out a plan of action. I’d go back to the police the next day. That Officer Mercer had said he hadn’t seen my fugitive, but maybe someone else in the department had seen him. Or maybe Officer Mercer was covering for him. A very small amount of that thirty million dollars might look like a lot of money in a policeman’s pocket. Oklahoma cops might make a lot more money than South American cops, but they could be bribed, too. Maybe my Mr. Allison hadn’t been so stupid after all. He managed to find a hiding place where he didn’t have to speak Spanish.

I admitted to myself that it was highly unlikely that Officer Mercer was on the take. He looked like the sort of officer who would rather die than break the rules. Still, if you’re going to be a detective, you have to consider all the possibilities. Of course, what happened next was a possibility I would never have considered.

I got out of the car still thinking about what to do next when I heard him. I had let down my guard, and before I knew what was happening, it was too late. His foot scuffed on the blacktop of the parking lot, but as I turned around to confront him, I was stopped by the feel of a gun placed in my back.

“Well, well, this is gonna be easier than I thought,” a gravelly voice muttered softly. I recognized it in an instant. It was Little Georgie Monello, top hit man for the Capella family. I was in big trouble. It was times like this that I wished I still carried a gun.

“Still not packing, huh?” Georgie asked me, almost as if he were reading my thoughts as he did a perfunctory pat down.

“Never needed one before,” I muttered, still facing away from him with my hands up. “How you been, Georgie?”

“Better than you,” he remarked. “Now get back in your car, and make it slow. I’ll be right behind you.”

I know in the movies, the baddie always slides into the seat next to his victim. Why? I guess it makes a better camera shot. Georgie wasn’t posing for any pictures. He knew how to do his job. If he stayed behind me, I’d never know if he wasn’t alert. He could blow me away in a heartbeat.

“Where to?” I asked.

“Someplace quiet,” he answered. “Head south—out of town.”

Ever since I had taken out Louie Capella, I had known I would be on the Capella hit list. It didn’t matter, though. I didn’t have much to live for. But I hadn’t expected this. Augie Capella had taken over when Louie bought it. He was Louie’s cousin, not his brother, so his blood didn’t run as hot when it came to revenge. Some folks said he was just cautious; other said he was a coward. Whatever the reason, his guys had stayed away from me.

But that was in Chicago, I realized mentally kicking myself. Sure, it made sense now, I thought as the town of Ovid disappeared in the darkness behind us. In Chicago, I still had friends on the force. If Augie wasted me there, they’d be all over him like stink on shit. Not so in Oklahoma. And I doubted if the local authorities in Ovid had had much experience dealing with organized crime. I’d be just one more unsolved murder, and by the time the Chicago authorities looked into the case—if they bothered to do so—the trail would be cold and any evidence compromised.

“How did you find me, Georgie?” I asked as calmly as I could. I didn’t expect to live through the evening, but I didn’t want to go to my grave without a few answers.

“Somebody ratted on you,” he laughed. It wasn’t a pleasant laugh.

“We’ve been waiting for this chance. That’s the thing about Augie. He’s real patient. He’s not like Louie.”

“No,” I agreed, unable to resist the barb. “That’s because Louie’s dead.”

“You can give him my regards in a few minutes,” Georgie growled.

That was no surprise. I didn’t think he was taking me out to the country for a little moonlight stroll. No, Georgie was here to finish what Louie had started. I was a dead man.

“This’ll do,” Georgie said when we had driven down to the edge of a river along a deserted farm road. “Stop and get out—slowly.”

If there had been a chance, I would have taken it. Georgie was a pro, though. God only knew how many guys he had taken out, but he had always been smart enough to cover his tracks.

“Turn around,” he ordered. I did. He was a good fifteen feet from me, an ugly silenced pistol in his gloved hand. Like I said, Georgie was a pro.

“Throw me a bone,” I said, stalling for time. “Who ratted me out?”

Georgie just grinned. “That’s not my department. Besides, I wouldn’t tell you if I knew. So long, Riley.”

He was going to pull the trigger, I realized with a sinking feeling. Well, as I said, he was a pro. There was no way he was going to prolong this. This was just a job. I wasn’t a human being; I was an assignment. I braced myself for the inevitable pain. Knowing Georgie, he’d shoot wherever it hurt the most.

“Freeze!” a somehow familiar voice boomed from a short distance away.

Georgie didn’t freeze. He turned quicker than I could have ever imagined, ready to fire at the voice. As I said, Georgie was a pro. But Georgie wasn’t fast enough. I caught the muzzle flash of a weapon in the darkness. Georgie screamed as his gun went flying from his hand. There was no blood. The stranger had shot the gun right out of his

hand, hitting only the weapon.

I know, that happens in the movies all the time. In real life, though, shooting a gun out of someone's hand is just about the most difficult—and stupidest—thing I could ever imagine doing. Every rookie officer is told to shoot for the money. Go for the torso. It's the biggest target. A shot anywhere will at least slow the assailant down, so go for the biggest target. Even if you did manage to shoot the gun out of someone's hand, doing it cleanly, hitting only the gun, would take superhuman skill—or blind luck. For some reason, I was betting on skill. Why? Because the shooter fired only once, as if he knew exactly where the shot was going to go.

Georgie was alternately cursing and crying, rubbing his stinging hand with his good one. He made no move to pick his weapon up from the ground. I think he realized that the only way that shot had been lucky was because his assailant hadn't nailed him right between the eyes—which he richly deserved.

I wasn't surprised to see Officer Mercer walking toward us. What I was surprised to see was that his cruiser was only a hundred feet or so down the road behind us. I hadn't even hear him drive up. Had he followed us, his lights off? I didn't think so. I had looked back in the mirror a number of times, and the white cruiser would have been visible behind us even on a moonless night like that night. He had to be sitting there, waiting. Didn't he?

"Are you all right?" he asked me in his calm voice.

I nodded. "Thanks to you. Where did you pick us up? I didn't even see you behind us."

He didn't bother to answer me, but I wasn't offended. He had his eyes on Georgie. With his gun, he motioned Georgie to the caged back seat of his cruiser. "Follow me in," he told me.

The drive back into Ovid was much more pleasant than the drive out. And it gave me time to think. I had been ratted out by somebody, but who? Well, it had to be either my firm or their client. No one else knew where I was. But why would my client rat me out? Or why would my

firm do it?

Maybe the whole thing had been a setup. Maybe Augie Capella was Ridgeway's mysterious client. That would make sense. It would mean there was no missing thirty million dollars. It would mean it was all just a ruse to get me out of town. But no, that didn't sound right. Ridgeway was clever enough to think of that, but he had a reputation of being clean. I couldn't see him dirtying his hands to set up an ambush for an ex-cop. Besides, he had no known connections to the Capellas, or any other organized crime figures for that matter. And frankly, Augie wasn't smart enough to come up with a plot like that. None of his lieutenants were bright enough to think of it either. My late mother's vegetable garden had a higher IQ than Augie's entire gang.

So maybe it was somebody in my own firm, I thought grimly. Maybe there was a secretary who owed a lot of money. Selling me out might be their ticket to solvency. But no, I doubted that. Mac was too careful in his hiring practices. And most of his people had been with him for years. He paid them well and they gave him loyalty in return.

Maybe Officer Mercer could get Georgie to tell him more than he'd told me. But I doubted it. If Georgie had known who had sold me out, he would have told me. After all, he had a gun trained on me. Georgie would have found it fitting to tell me who had betrayed me just before he pulled the trigger. Talk about adding insult to injury.

To my surprise, Georgie was a good boy when he got out of the car at City Hall. He seemed almost in a trance as he shuffled ahead of Officer Mercer. No one was on duty in the police station that occupied a small wing of the City Hall building. As Officer Mercer locked the cell door, I asked him, "Do you mind if I ask him a few questions?"

He shook his head. "Not now. I had to sedate him. He'll be asleep in a minute."

"Oh," I said, not bothering to hide my disappointment. "Did he say anything in the car?"

Officer Mercer just shrugged. "Nothing important. The Judge will see him in court at nine tomorrow. You need to be there, too."

I smiled. "I wouldn't miss it for the world." Then I put out my hand to him. As he shook it, I said, "Thanks again. You saved my life."

"Yes," he replied. It's difficult to be ironic with just one word, but somehow he managed. I got the odd feeling that there was something he wasn't telling me. Well, it would have to wait for morning.

I wanted to be done with Georgie as quickly as possible. Then I could get back to my assignment. By tomorrow afternoon, word of this would be all over town. If Allison put two and two together, he'd be out of town before I could find him. But in spite of that, I wanted to be in that courtroom. There was nothing I wanted more than to see Little Georgie go down.

I had packed one sport coat and tie just in case I had to appear in court somewhere on the trip. It happens to private investigators with some regularity. So it was a well-groomed Jeff Riley who stepped into the Ovid courtroom at a quarter until nine the next morning. No trial was in session, and the only two people in the room were two very attractive young women. One was blonde and the other brunette. Both wore conservative outfits—women's suits with silky blouses. The blonde wore dark blue and the brunette a pinstriped gray, but neither outfit did anything to detract from their looks.

The brunette turned to face me. "Hi," she said to me with a slight smile as she extended a feminine hand. I took it. For a woman, she had a firm handshake. I liked that. "I'm Susan Jager. I'll be your attorney today, Mr. Riley."

"My attorney?" I repeated stupidly. "I wasn't aware I needed an attorney."

"Oh!" she replied carefully. "It seems Officer Mercer charged you with disturbing the peace last night. Don't worry, it's just a minor charge. I'm sure we can clear it up in no time."

"I thought I was to be here for Little Georgie's arraignment."

She looked puzzled. "Little Georgie? Oh, you mean Mr. Monello. You're correct. The Judge will see him first. Just have a seat with me

at the defense table. The Judge will be here any minute and he doesn't like people moving around in the room once court has begun."

The blonde had already wordlessly taken a seat in the visitor's gallery. As instructed, I plopped down next to Susan just in time to see Officer Mercer enter the room and intone, "All rise."

As we rose, I saw Little Georgie enter the room and stand before the bench. He seemed to still be in a trance as he shuffled toward the bench without so much as a single guard. When he was in place and we were on our feet, Officer Mercer continued, "The Municipal Court of the City of Ovid, Oklahoma, is now in session, the Honorable Judge presiding."

That was different, I thought. Back home, he would have announced the name of the judge instead of just the title. There was no nameplate on the bench either. It seemed I was about to appear before a nameless magistrate.

The Judge was reasonably impressive in his crisp black robe. If there were recruiting posters for judges, this one could be on one, I thought. He looked to be middle-aged with just a touch of gray in his neatly-trimmed brown hair and beard. He was fit although not thin, and his gold-rimmed glasses did nothing to soften a pair of steel blue eyes that seemed to miss nothing in the room. "You may be seated," he ordered in a voice obviously used to the responsibilities of command.

Suddenly, Little Georgie seemed to come out of his trance. He looked around suspiciously, muttering, "What the fuck?"

"Mr. Monello!" the Judge boomed, causing the little man to jump. "I will not tolerate such language in my courtroom. Is that understood?"

This wasn't the first time Georgie had appeared before a judge. He knew the drill. It didn't do any good to be defiant. If you looked abject enough, a judge might cut you a little slack. Georgie looked down respectfully and replied, "Yes, Your Honor." He continued to look furtively about the room, though, as if unsure how he had managed to wind up in a courtroom.

“George Monello,” the Judge began, “you have been charged with illegal possession of a firearm, kidnapping, attempted murder, and resisting arrest in our jurisdiction. How do you plead?”

“Uh... Your Honor, this is all a misunderstanding,” Georgie began nervously. “And is that dame over there my lawyer? I need a lawyer before I plead.”

“That is Mr. Riley’s attorney,” the Judge explained patiently. “You are not entitled to defense counsel.”

Georgie’s mouth dropped open. “Not entitled? What kind of a court is this anyway?”

“It is the Municipal Court of the City of Ovid,” the Judge replied, making it sound as if he had just announced that it was the Supreme Court of the United States. “I think you will find it is a fair court, quite unlike the ones you have been in before. Here, the rights and concerns of the victims take precedence. It is unlikely that the fourteen murders you have committed for your employers would have been dealt with so lightly here.”

Georgie’s face became the color of ash. “I... I’ve never been convicted of anything. I was only up on three murder raps and beat ’em all.”

“Yes,” the Judge agreed, “but there were others as well. What about the murders of Mr. Riley’s wife and little daughter?”

Now it was my turn to have my mouth fall open in stunned silence. I had never suspected that it was Georgie who had killed them. When I caught up with Louie Capella, he told me it was Ozzie who did it. And Ozzie had been shot by a rival gang just a week before I found Louie. That son of a bitch! He had lied to me, just to get one last laugh at me before...

“No, Mr. Monello, you will find that justice in Ovid is both swift and appropriate. Since you like death so much, you will be forever associated with it. You are guilty of more than most men could ever imagine, and for your crimes, you will pay now.” He began to chant in something that sounded almost like the Latin I remembered hearing

when some of the priests still used it liberally, but it wasn't their form of Latin. This was a rich, almost musical tongue, and there was power in the words.

"No... I..." Georgie managed to say before his voice was replaced by a raspy cry. It was as if he had suddenly forgotten how to speak. His eyes were wide and frightened, and his entire body seemed to be shifting.

I looked in helpless fascination as Georgie's form began to shimmer and finally change. He was becoming smaller, and his skin was becoming darker until it was as black as coal. His clothing simply ceased to exist as his arms began to flap aimlessly, suddenly expanding and covered with a coating of feathers. His unintelligible screams of shock and rage became a shrill "caw" as his head became smaller and his lips pushed forward into a dull, dark beak. What had been a man only moments before was now a large and very frightened crow.

Without a word, Officer Mercer stepped over to the new bird, clutching him carefully and carrying him out of the courtroom.

I looked around at my attorney. She seemed unperturbed by what had just happened, concentrating instead on a thin file in front of her. The blonde in the visitor's gallery also seemed unconcerned, as if this sort of thing happened every day. I couldn't deny that justice had been served. Little Georgie was bad news. If anything, the Judge had let him off lightly. Being a bird was more than he deserved. I hoped he was road kill before the end of the day.

The Judge seemed to be reading my mind. "You think Mr. Monello deserved worse?"

"He's still alive," I replied, rising to face the Judge. "That's more than can be said for his victims." Including my family.

"Yes," the Judge agreed, "but his life will be unpleasant and short. He remembers who and what he was. Now, though, he is just a crow—an eater of carrion no less. He is not a particularly large one at that. His unfamiliarity with his new existence will probably assure him a very

short life and a particularly nasty end. Crows have many predators, you know.”

I imagined he was right about that.

“Now, Mr. Riley, since you have been good enough to stand before the bench, it is your turn.”

“Your Honor,” I began uncomfortably, “I’m not aware of any crime I have committed here. I had Officer Mercer’s permission to conduct my investigation in Ovid.”

Was I frightened? Of course I was. I had just watched a man change into a bird. What was my fate to be? I was standing before a... being (for I was certain he was not really a man) with powers I had never imagined existed. People weren’t changed into crows in the real world, and the real world was all I knew.

“Yes, you did have permission,” he agreed. “But did you have permission to commit murder?”

“Murder?”

“Do you deny that you have murdered men?”

I gulped uncomfortably as I vainly tried to gather my wits. It was my attorney who jumped to my rescue. “Your Honor,” she pleaded, “may I have a moment with my client?”

The Judge nodded without comment. Susan Jager motioned me to the defense table and leaned over to me as I sat down. “Mr. Riley, the answers you give now will determine your fate forever.”

“You mean he might change me into a bird, too?” I ventured nervously.

She nodded. “Or worse. Look, I’ve represented many people before many courts. You seem to be a decent man. Most judges will give you points for being honest. The Judge here is no exception. Tell the truth. Odds are he knows it anyhow. Now, did you kill anyone?”

“Yes,” I said with a sigh, “but I was exonerated by a police review board. They ruled it was self-defense.”

Her pretty blue eyes seemed to bore all the way to my soul as she asked, "Was it self-defense?"

After a moment's reflection, I replied, "No."

She closed her eyes and sighed. "Just tell the truth, Mr. Riley. There may be a chance for you if you do."

"Are you ready to continue?" the Judge asked impatiently.

"Yes, Your Honor," she said, motioning for me to stand once more before the Judge.

"Well, Mr. Riley," the Judge said, "are you ready to answer the question? Have you murdered men?"

"Yes," I admitted, my voice shaking.

"Your Honor," my attorney chimed in, "perhaps we should see the circumstances of these 'murders'."

The Judge was thoughtful. "That might be in order. I, too, am curious as to the circumstances. Let us proceed."

I felt no movement, but suddenly the world had changed. I was no longer in a courtroom. Instead, I was standing near the edge of a lake in a flat, open area surrounded by trees. I looked down at myself. I was wearing a light flannel shirt against the growing chill of the spring air, and jeans. I was dressed the same way I had been dressed the day... Oh no!

"Boat all ready?" a musical, feminine voice asked.

I turned. It was Mary. Oh God, it was Mary! I wanted to cry and enfold her in my arms and tell her how much I had missed her, but I couldn't. I was reliving that terrible day and there was nothing I could do differently. I realized that when I said, "Yeah, I think so. Watch it while I back the car down."

"No, I'll get it," she offered.

As she turned and headed toward our aging Pontiac, I could see Trish already in the back seat. "Hi, Daddy!" she called, the happy smile of a

six-year-old on her face as she pushed her bright blonde hair back. I wanted more desperately than anything else in the world to scream at her to get out of that car. I wanted to reach out and grab Mary before she opened the car door. But I couldn't. I was nothing more than an observer in my own body.

"Hi, Pumpkin!" I called back happily, but knowing in my trapped mind that these would be the last words she ever heard me say to her.

I know in reality that what happened next took only a few seconds—a minute at the most. I watched in silent horror as Mary strode purposefully to the car stepped in, closed the door, and started the engine. One second, she was there, ready to back the car down to hitch the boat trailer up. The next second, the world exploded into a ball of flame as my ears hurt, both from the sound of the explosion and the intensity of my scream.

Thankfully, that world melted away. The light of day was exchanged for the dim artificial light of a rundown warehouse. Shark Petrillo, bodyguard to Louie Capella lay motionless in a pool of his own blood. His boss, Louie himself stood quaking only a few feet away.

"Time to pay, Louie," I said quietly, my Police Special lined up right between his eyes.

"You... you're not going to shoot me in cold blood, are you?"

"Like you killed my family?"

"I told you, it was a mistake," Louie whined. "You were supposed to be driving. You always backed the car up yourself. It was Ozzie's fault. Your family wasn't supposed to get hurt."

"Well, they did," I growled. "They got hurt real bad. They got hurt all the way dead. I'm gonna give you more of a chance than you gave them." My eyes dropped to Shark's gun, lying practically at Louie's feet where Shark had dropped it when I nailed him.

Louie's eyes were wide. "You can't be serious. I could never get to it before you shot me."

"Do it or I'll shoot you where you stand," I said resolutely.

It took him a few seconds to work up the courage, but Louie complied. He knew from the look in my eyes that I meant every word I had said. He dropped for the gun. I even let him get his hands on it. I wanted it to look like self-defense. I didn't plan to be off the force and have what little life I had left ruined by a murder rap. The second he gripped the gun, I emptied the rest of my clip in him. I watched in grim satisfaction as he shook with each impact. My thoughts were on Mary and Trish when his body finally stopped moving...

There was silence. I looked up into the stern face of the Judge. How had he done that? It was as if I had been hurled back in time to repeat the worst moments of my life, and now I was to pay for my indulgences.

"And did you continue your career as a police officer?" the Judge asked me, not without sympathy.

I shook my head. "No, not for very long anyway. After the Review Board, I resigned."

"Why?"

I was silent for a moment; then replied, "I swore to uphold the law. I began to realize that I had broken that oath."

"But when you killed Mr. Capella, you were killing a murderer," the Judge reasoned. "Surely you realized that."

"I did," I admitted, "but let's just say it wasn't my style. I found a part of myself I never wanted to see again. I was afraid if I took the law into my own hands once, I might do it again. That's why I no longer even carry a gun."

"An interesting story, Mr. Riley. However, this crime is not what you are charged with today," the Judge explained. He turned to Officer Mercer. "What is Mr. Riley charged with today?"

"Disturbing the peace," Officer Mercer replied.

If I hadn't been so frightened, I would have laughed. Disturbing the peace? Was that all he could come up with? I didn't laugh, though. Whatever charge he would have come up with would have been

merely an excuse for whatever they intended to do with me. I wondered how road kill tasted. Georgie already knew by now, and it seemed my turn was coming.

“Your Honor,” Susan said, coming to her feet, “I would suggest that given the circumstances, the charges against my client be dropped and he be set free—with of course his memories of these proceedings erased.”

The Judge studied me carefully for a moment. I could feel his eyes staring at me. It was as if they were penetrating to the center of my very being. Who was this Judge? Who could have such powers?

“You’ve been charged with disturbing the peace,” the Judge intoned, trying to make the charge sound significant as he broke the silence. “I find you guilty.”

I braced myself. The Judge was muttering in Latin again. Whatever he had planned for me was about to happen. There was a tingling sensation that seemed to go through my entire body. With effort, I looked down at myself. I was becoming smaller and the skin on my hands was becoming darker. I waited in fear for my arms to become wings and for feathers to sprout from my skin, but it didn’t happen. Instead, my skin changed to a dark brown, and my hands were smaller and my fingernails were suddenly long and painted a dark red. I felt something tickling my neck and used my changed fingers to reach back and pull forward a strand of long, soft hair the color of night.

I gasped as two mounds pushed forward from my chest and the weight between my legs was suddenly replaced by an unnatural emptiness. I could feel my entire body rearranging itself. The process was not painful or even unpleasant, but it was strange and unsettling. Even my clothes were not immune to the change. I felt my ankles suddenly moved about, as if my heels were now higher than my toes. A look down told me that I now wore women’s pumps, brown with about a two-inch heel. They were plainly visible now since my pants had altered to form a short tan skirt. Where the skirt ended, long dark brown legs encased in nylon were visible. My sport coat was still a

coat, but it was tan like my skirt and feminine in cut. My tie was gone, changed into something that felt like a necklace over a white silky blouse.

“Oh god!” I nearly screamed, surprised to hear a voice that was husky but obviously feminine.

“Ms. Patton,” the Judge said, gesturing to the blonde in the gallery, “would you please show Ms. Hazleton to her new office?”

I was shaking when the blonde gently took my arm. “Come with me,” she urged, barely above a whisper. “I’ll explain what I can in a few minutes.”

I followed her nervously, unsure of how to walk in the heels. Ms. Patton seemed to understand the problem and walked slowly, waiting for me at the entrance to the courtroom.

No! This couldn’t happen. I had to regain my true body. I turned quickly to face the Judge again, but to my surprise, he was gone. The courtroom was now empty, except for my attorney. “Susan, I...” I began, really hearing for the first time my new voice. It was a little husky with a soft southern accent. It was the voice of a black woman.

Susan gave me a thin smile. “Go on with Cindy. We’ll talk later.”

There seemed to be no other course of action to take. I turned back to my guide and didn’t resist as she gently took me by the arm. She did it not only to guide me in the right direction but to steady me in my new heels as well.

I felt as if I was walking in a dream—a nightmare, really. I was a woman. I could feel the sway of my hips with each step, the jiggle of my breasts, and the bouncing of my longer hair. And it felt as if I was walking on tiptoe, carefully placing each step almost in front of the other due to the natural motion in my hips. The air was cool on my exposed legs. How could this possibly be happening?

There was another factor as well, I thought as we walked down the corridor. I was black. Now, I’ve never considered myself to be prejudiced. I mean, working with the Chicago Police, some of the

finest officers I knew were black. I had had black supervisors and black partners and I knew them to be police officers first and whatever else they were second. But like most whites on the force, I had associated on my own time mostly with other whites. Mary and I had lived in a mostly white neighborhood, and all of our good friends were white.

Now, I was not only a woman, but I was a black woman. I didn't know how to be black or how to be a woman. My only chance was to get changed back into myself, but even at this early point in my transformation, I suspected that the chances of getting that done were slim at best. Whatever power had done this to me hadn't done it just to change me back again whenever I chose.

"It's difficult at first," my guide—Susan had called her Cindy—told me, almost as if she had read my mind. "But you'll get used to it."

"I don't want to get used to it," I mumbled as I watched city employees rushing to and fro down the halls on various errands. Some, like Cindy and me, were real. Others—most really—had that faint transparent appearance.

"Take my advice," Cindy said quietly as she led me into an unoccupied office, "just try to be who you've become. You'll find it's not bad at all. And this is who you'll be for the rest of your life."

She was pointing to a brass nameplate on a large secretarial desk. The name on the nameplate was 'Wanda Hazleton.'

"Wanda?"

"Yes," Cindy told me. "You're now Wanda Hazleton. Look, you're lucky. Most people wander around for hours after their transformation just trying to find out who they are and where they're supposed to go. You're getting the royal treatment."

"Most people?" I asked. "Are there others like me?"

Cindy laughed, "Honey, we're all like you. Everyone you see in Ovid—except the shades of course—used to be someone else. That's how Ovid works. You're the administrative assistant for Mr. Hanes, the City

Manager. That's why the Judge wanted me to bring you down here myself. Mr. Hanes is a little... difficult to work with. He's a very private person."

That surprised me. City managers were usually very public people. Their job demanded it. I was familiar with the City Manger form of government. Some of the Chicago suburbs used them. It was a form of government very popular in smaller cities and towns where the mayor and council held part time positions and weren't really professionals when it came to administering a city. The city council would make the rules, but the city manager would advise them and then carry out the day-to-day operation of the town.

"Now, just stay here at your desk," Cindy instructed me. "Mr. Hanes will be out to see you when he's ready. Never disturb him when his door is closed like now. Use the time to get used to who you are. And don't worry about having to pee. You'll know how to do it when the time comes. All you have to do is relax and let your mind go. You'll find your body knows what to do. I'm down in the court wing if you need anything. My phone extension is on your Rolodex there. If you're free, I'll take you to lunch in a couple of hours."

And then I was alone. I was Wanda Hazleton whoever that was. Even with Cindy's help, I didn't really know who I was or where I lived. I sat down at the desk. Come to think of it, most women I knew kept a purse hidden in a desk drawer. Yes, there it was, down in a large bottom drawer. It was brown and matched my shoes and it looked big enough to live out of for a week.

I pulled it up on the desk, catching the strap on one of the fingers of my left hand. I looked to see what it had caught on and gasped. It was a wedding ring! Of course, it wasn't the kind of ring I had worn when I was married to Mary. Instead of a large gold band, this ring was small and delicate, but a large diamond rose up from the band, catching on the strap of the purse. Oh dear god, no! Wasn't it bad enough that I had become a different race and a different sex? I had to be married, too?

I dived quickly into the purse. I had to know more about this Wanda

person I had suddenly become. After digging through a pile of cosmetics whose purpose I didn't really want to know, I found a brown wallet. I flipped it open, struggling to find a driver's license. There it was, the picture of my new face imprinted on it. Or at least, I assumed it was my picture. I hadn't seen my face yet. I groaned when I saw the face. It was not particularly attractive, featuring a wide, prominent nose and thick lips. I looked fat. I looked down at myself. My new breasts were certainly large, but I didn't appear fat.

Then I found another picture. It was a city ID, but the picture was much better. With a sigh of relief, I realized that driver's license pictures in Oklahoma were as poor as the ones in Illinois. My ID picture showed a better view of my new face. I was smiling, and my lips were certainly larger than they had been when I was a man, but they weren't unattractively large. My nose was still a little wide, but not terribly so. The picture that I was now looking at was of an attractive young black woman, no more than thirty. I checked the age on the driver's license. Sure enough—twenty-eight. So I had lost a few years, but only a few.

There was a picture in the wallet as well. There were three people in the photo, and I realized with trepidation that this was my family. I looked young and attractive in the picture, and the black man standing next to me looked intelligent and... handsome. There was a little girl in the photo as well. She was about six, it appeared, with dark skin like both of her parents and a radiant smile. Her hair was in long, black pigtails, the color of carved ebony.

I jumped suddenly as the door to Mr. Hanes' office opened without anyone there. "Come in," a deep voice said from within.

I quickly stuffed the evidence of my new identity back in the purse and jumped to my feet, nearly stumbling from lack of experience in heels. I saw the name on the door: 'P. Hanes.' I wondered what the 'P' stood for.

"Shut the door behind you," the voice said. I was peering into an office which was intentionally dark. Oh, there was some light coming in through the closed blinds, but it did little to offset the effect of dark

wood panels and a deep red carpet. A large desk was lit by a single lamp which threw minimal light over its surface. Even the chairs were dark, covered as they were with a deep red leather which seemed to reflect little light. When I shut the door, the room became even darker.

“Sit.”

It was a command. Quickly, and I hoped properly for a woman, I sat. I peered at the man sitting behind the desk. The dim light over the desk did nothing to reveal the appearance of the man. He was tall—that much I could tell. But beyond that, he was nothing but an ominous shape in the shadows.

“You are new here,” he began. “I would prefer a shade for an assistant, but my brother has decided otherwise. At least he has allowed me to dispense with the ruse and tell you who we really are. There is no other way for you to do this job properly.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. A shade? Cindy had said something about shades, too. And what about his brother? It had to be the Judge. As for the ruse, I had already come to the conclusion that Ovid wasn’t what it seemed to be. I sat quietly, though. If I was to learn, it would come from listening.

“Ovid is the creation of what you would call the mythological gods of ancient Greece and Rome.”

“You’re joking,” I commented, my new tongue operating at a rate far faster than my brain.

He leaned forward, his appearance suddenly revealed. I saw before me a large but very thin man, dressed in a dark suit that looked to be well tailored and expensive. His shirt was a crisp white, accented by a tie the color of dark blood. It was cut from fine silk. But it was the face that I was drawn to. Thin, framed by hair as dark as my own, his face was as white as mine was black. A patrician nose sat over thin, pale lips. But the eyes... I remembered when I had met Ridgeway how I had thought his eyes were the darkest I had ever seen. That was no longer the case. Mr. Hanes’ eyes were blacker still. It was as if no light could escape them, mini-black holes embedded in that lean face.

“I never joke, Ms. Hazleton,” he told me, his voice soft but menacing, and I believed him at once. I suddenly realized it might be absolutely dangerous not to believe him.

When I bit my tongue to stifle any reply, he leaned back into the darkness. “As I was saying, my associates and I are what you would call gods. We have formed this town for reasons which do not concern you. You must accept that as you must accept your new identity. You are now and will be for the remainder of your life Wanda Hazleton.”

He stopped as if waiting for me to speak. Hesitantly, I asked, “But why did you change me into... into this?”

“I did not,” he replied. “My brother, the Judge, did. He has his own reasons—his own work—and I have mine. If you would know why you are the person you have become, you must ask him. I am your supervisor. What I can tell you is what I expect of you.”

He went on to explain that I was to be his interface with the mayor and the council. He would give them instructions and they would carry them out. It seemed the reverse of the municipal political systems I had known, but it made it obvious who was in charge. I would, in turn, report back to him. I wouldn’t need to see him. In fact, he warned me I might not see him for days or even weeks at a time. My computer would be used to file reports which he would see on his own system, whatever and wherever that might be.

“Are there any questions?” he asked with a faint attempt at civility.

“I’m not to disturb you at any time,” I ventured.

“That is correct.”

“But what if I need you for something important?”

“Then I will know,” he said cryptically. Then he stood, indicating that our interview was over.

I returned to my desk somewhat shaken. Gods? They were gods? That meant the Judge, Officer Mercer and Mr. Hanes were all... gods? I remembered reading a little mythology as a kid. Then there was a movie I saw on TV one night called *Clash of the Titans*. I thought the

gods all wore togas and sat around on a mountaintop somewhere. I could only remember a few of them. I would have to get a book on mythology to know who the players were. After all, Greek and Roman gods weren't discussed back when I was at the Police Academy.

True to her word, Cindy came by for lunch. It was a relief from the boredom. I had found very little of interest in the files and nothing other than a few basic office memos on my computer. Apparently being the administrative assistant to Mr. Hanes wasn't a terribly demanding job.

"So how are you doing?" she asked as she entered.

"Oh, just great," I said dryly. "I've already squatted to pee, practically fallen off these stupid heels twice, bent but didn't break a nail, took fifteen minutes to try to brush my hair right, and had a short chat with my charming boss."

Cindy looked up at the closed door leading to Mr. Hanes' office. "He doesn't socialize much," she admitted, understating the obvious. "As far as all the other things are concerned, don't worry. You'll get used to them. We all do."

I looked at her with curiosity. "Are you saying you used to be a man?"

She grinned. "That's right. Look at me now though—happily married, mother of two and pregnant again."

If my ass hadn't been wider than before, I think I would have fallen out of my chair. "Married? Pre... pregnant?"

She sat down across from my desk. "That's right. I know it doesn't show yet, but I'm just a few weeks into it. It's an interesting experience. It's really my first time. My other two kids are like us. They used to be men, too."

"Are they... girls now?" I asked, fascinated with how easily she had accepted what had been done to her.

"One is," she said brightly, pulling a photo out of her purse. "They're twins."

I peered at the picture. It showed a happy family—a handsome white man, Cindy, and two adorab... cute kids. They were about twelve or so I estimated, blonde like their mother. They were dressed in swimsuits, and all of them looked very happy.

“This shot was taken at Sunset Beach last month,” she explained. “That’s a nice lake not far from here. You’ll find out all about that, I’m sure. And the guy is my husband, Jerry.”

I looked down at the diamond ring on my own left hand. “Uh... Cindy, what’s it like to be... married?”

Her maternal smile became a wicked grin. “You’ll find out about that, too. Just don’t fight it. Fighting it doesn’t do any good in Ovid. Learn to enjoy being Wanda. I don’t know of too many people who don’t find that their new lives are an improvement. Except, of course, for guys like your friend, the crow.”

“So this is the Judge’s idea of a reward?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No, it’s not really a reward. But it’s not a punishment either. Nobody really knows why the Judge does things the way he does them. I’ve seen men become women and women become men for no obvious reason.”

“Mr. Hanes said it was the work of... the work of...” I couldn’t quite say it, as hard as I tried. Every time I tried to say “gods” in context, it was as if I lost my ability to speak.

“He told you?” Cindy gasped.

“He said I needed to know—for my job. He didn’t tell me who they were, though.”

“Well, as you’ve just found out, that’s a subject we can’t really talk about,” she explained. “In fact, the conversation we’ve been having already can only be between two people. If someone else walked in the room, we’d have to stop any talk of transformation.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “It’s just part of the rules. There are things we can’t talk

about and things we just don't know. It would drive you crazy to try to figure them all out. Sometimes, they even change a little. After a while, you just learn to live your life and enjoy it. Our... benefactors don't usually interfere."

"Then what's the purpose of all of this?" I asked, becoming truly fascinated. My anxieties had almost been overcome by my curiosity.

She grinned at me. "Does there have to be a purpose? What was the purpose of your life before?"

She had me there. Without Mary and Trisha, there hadn't been a great deal of purpose to my life. I had no close family. My dad was gone and my mom was in a nursing home back in Illinois, barely alive. She couldn't even remember her own name. I had a couple of brothers in the Chicago area, but we had little in common and rarely saw each other. So basically, I worked to eat and ate to have enough strength to work. I didn't even fish much anymore.

When I failed to answer, Cindy looked a little concerned. I think she realized the question had struck a nerve. I let her off the hook by saying, "Maybe we'd better go to lunch. I don't know when Mr. Hanes will need me."

We walked together to a little place near City Hall. It was called the Greenhouse, and when we were seated in a booth in a quiet part of the restaurant, I sighed thankfully. "I didn't think I was going to make it," I said. "How do you walk in these things?"

Cindy laughed. "You'll..."

"I know," I interrupted with a little laugh of mine own. "I'll get used to them."

"Yes, you will," she agreed as the menus were delivered. "And don't worry. You did fine walking over here. It's not so much the heels as not being used to the balance of your body."

She was right about that. Men's bodies are compact. The only protrusions which might swing about are fairly small and don't interfere with balance. Women on the other hand have fairly large masses of

flesh which change the way they walk. I had always wondered if women were putting on a little act as they swung their asses back and forth. I now knew it was more a function of pelvic shape and more fatty tissue on the rear. I must have presented an interesting view to male onlookers as I sashayed to lunch. There was something else I'd have to get used to—being ogled by men. On the way to the Greenhouse, I had noted several appreciative male stares.

I followed Cindy's lead and ordered a salad and iced tea. It didn't seem like much of a meal, but I knew my stomach was much smaller and it was satisfying. Besides, if I was stuck in this body for the rest of my life, I didn't want to end up looking like Aunt Jemima.

The conversation was light. Any eavesdropper would have not heard anything except two women who worked in the same building talking about the things all women talk about. Cindy explained that her job was much like my own, working as an administrative assistant to the Judge. I suspected her boss was much more approachable than my own. Mr. Hanes had said something about the Judge being his brother. If so, there was little family resemblance.

I listened carefully as Cindy did most of the talking. I found she was subtly coaching me in how to be a woman. She would talk about cosmetics and how to use them, clothes, and general lifestyle in Ovid. I was actually grateful for her help. In a few hours, I would be on my own, living with a husband I had never met and trying to act like a normal wife. Well, as normal a wife as I could be without jumping into the sack with my hubby. Eventually, that might be unavoidable, but I had no interest in trying out my new equipment. Taking a piss had been a nearly traumatic experience.

Lunch out of the way, we headed back to the office. I found that if I didn't think about it, I could walk just fine. By the time I was alone back in my office, I had begun to feel I could do anything in heels short of running a footrace. My period of self-congratulation was short lived though, for the door to Mr. Hanes' office opened before I could even sit down.

"Come in, Ms. Hazleton." The voice didn't sound pleased.

“Where were you?” he demanded without preamble.

“At lunch,” I replied, trying to sound nonchalant. Secretly, I was quaking in my high heels.

“Lunch?”

I fought the impulse to make a flippant remark. “Yes. Cindy—Ms. Patton—took me to lunch.”

“I see,” he replied. I could tell he didn’t approve much of the Judge’s lenient lunch hour policies. In truth, we had been gone nearly an hour and a half. But fortunately, the subject appeared closed. He handed me some handwritten notes. “Here are the instructions for the Mayor. Type them and give them to him before you leave today.”

“Yes, sir.” I was a rotten typist, but I’d do what I could. As I left the office, hearing the door slam behind me, I looked at the notes. They were scrawled in some foreign language that looked a little like Latin. Oh great. What was I supposed to do, inscribe them on marble tablets?

Cindy had said something to me about letting myself go. Maybe that would work. I gave it a shot, it still wasn’t easy. I had to carefully look at each word, but I was relieved to find that I didn’t have to look at the keys on the keyboard after a few tries. My fingers seemed to know where the right keys were when I just stopped thinking about them and typed. I looked at the screen to check my work. To my surprise, the typed words looked nothing like I had seen on the paper. I felt crestfallen for a moment, concerned that I had screwed up everything. Then I looked again at the words:

MEMO TO: Mayor R. Gooding

FROM: P. Hanes

SUBJ: Projected Budget Changes

I gasped. I had typed nothing like that. But of course, the Mayor wouldn’t be able to read Latin unless he was one of the gods. I knew he was not as I had caught a glimpse of him earlier and saw him to be a shade. I continued to type, quickly and accurately. It was almost as if

I had been doing it all my life, and yet Mary always used to tell me my typing looked as if I had been wearing mittens while I did it.

As I finished my typing, I thought about the job that had brought me to Ovid. This time yesterday, I was doing the job I had come to enjoy. I was Mike Hammer out on the streets of Manhattan, working on a case while a soft jazz band played in the background. Of course, everything was in black and white, but that was the way it was supposed to be. Now, here I was, a black woman. I couldn't think of any detectives who were black women. The closest I could come up with was Mannix's secretary on the old TV show I used to watch late at night.

Maybe I could still do the job, though. After all, I still remembered all the moves. I wondered if Mac would believe me if I called him and told him what had happened. Well, why not? What did I have to lose? I didn't expect him to believe me, but it was worth a shot. I picked up the phone and dialled Mac's office.

"Charles McKenzie and Associates," the receptionist, Jennifer, chirped professionally. "How may I direct your call?"

Now, Jennifer was pretty good at screening out unwanted calls. Obviously, she wouldn't recognize my voice. So I had to make something up. "I've been talking to one of your associates, Jeff Riley, and he recommended I call Mr. McKen..."

"I'm sorry, who did you say recommended us?" Jennifer broke in.

"Jeff Riley," I said, a little less confidently. What was wrong? Jennifer and I were good friends. She knew me—or rather Jeff—well.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but there's no Jeff Riley here."

I didn't go on. Slowly, I put the receiver down. No Jeff Riley? It seemed they had not only changed me; they had erased all trace of my identity. What did that mean? Did they just cloud their minds and make them forget I had ever existed? Or had they really removed me from existence entirely? Just how powerful were these gods?

I picked up the phone again. This time, I'd call one of my brothers. It was one thing to erase my memory from someone like Jennifer, but

what about my family? My brother, Mike would certainly remember me. I got through to him with no trouble. He sold insurance, so he'd always be available on the phone.

"I'm trying to run down an old high school friend," I lied. I had used the ploy while a detective many times. "His name is Jeff Riley, and I was told you might be his brother."

"I'm sorry," Mike's familiar voice drawled, "I've only got one brother, and his name isn't Jeff."

"Thanks anyway," I mumbled softly.

"My pleasure," he replied. "I hope you find him."

"I hope so, too," I said, hanging up. There was a tear in my eye as I realized it was probably the last time I would ever speak to Mike. What had happened? How could he forget his own brother?

Then, I realized that if Jeff Riley had never existed, then he had never been there to marry Mary O'Hara. That meant the mob would have had no reason to kill her. But of course, it also meant that Trisha would never have been born either. I felt sick. It was bad enough that my daughter had been needlessly murdered but it was quite another thing if I were to find she had never existed.

Forgetting my nails were now longer, I nearly broke one punching in a number I hadn't used in a long time.

"O'Hara residence," Mary's mother answered in her sweet high voice.

It was time for the lie again. "Mrs. O'Hara, my name is... Wanda—Wanda Hazleton. I think I may have gone to school with your daughter."

"You knew my Mary?" she asked. My heart sank. She didn't say "know"; she said "knew."

"Yes, I did," I managed. "I've lost touch with her. Is she still living there in Chicago?"

"Oh, Wanda," my former mother-in-law began sadly, "I'm sorry, but Mary's dead."

“Dead? Oh, no!”

“Yes,” she went on. I hated doing this to her. I could almost see the tears in her eyes. “She and her husband and their little daughter, Patty, were killed in a car accident. It’s been three years now...”

As her voice trailed off, I quickly said, “Mrs. O’Hara, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I’m sorry to bother you.”

“That’s all right, dear. Were you a good friend of hers?”

We talked for a few minutes more as I lied about memories of Mary. They were stories Mary had told me about high school. I had just added Wanda’s presence to them to give them a more plausible sound. When I hung up, I realized that Mary’s mother and I had had little to say to each other after Mary’s death. She had always blamed me in a way for her daughter’s death. I had blamed myself as well. But apparently some higher fate had decided she would die no matter what. It was a sobering thought.

I wondered about Mary’s family in this new reality. She had still had a daughter; while we had called Patricia just Trisha, Mary and her husband had called her Patty. The genes might have been different, but I was sure it was the same soul—or whatever the true spirit of a person was.

So reality had been rewritten. Apparently there was no thirty-five-year-old private detective named Jeff Riley, and so Mary O’Hara had married someone else, giving birth to a daughter. Then tragically, Mary and her daughter had still died, but this time, it was in a car accident, and not the result of an explosive device meant for me. That had been how Little Georgie had done it. He had wired an explosive to our car’s ignition, thinking I would be the one to back our car down to the landing to attach the boat trailer after fishing. Instead, it had been Mary and Trisha in the car that day. I had watched helplessly as the car exploded. One minute, Trisha had been there, waving happily from the car. Then, in the next instant, I had been thrown to the ground as several pounds of explosives reduced the car to charred remains after a devastating fireball.

Had reality really been rewritten, or was it only a memory that had been changed? Did their gravestones still say Riley on them? Did Mary's mother simply look at them and see another last name? I'd never know, I realized. But in a strange way, I felt better about it. I could accept that others remembered Mary and Trisha's deaths as a tragic accident rather than as a wanton murder I had been unable to stop.

It also meant that no one remembered the mission I had been sent to Oklahoma to accomplish. I didn't work for Mac and I never had. Ridgeway had never sent me off to find an embezzler. At least I had partially solved the mystery. I wondered what fate the embezzler had suffered before the Judge. Maybe he hadn't even come to Ovid after all.

But wait a minute, I suddenly thought. Ridgeway had said something about Allison not looking like the picture we had of him. Did he mean a disguise or did he mean the Judge had changed him? And if the Judge had changed him, why did anyone remember him? Peter Allison should have ceased to exist in the outside world, just as Jeff Riley had ceased to exist. So there were two possible answers. Either Peter Allison was not in Ovid or there was more going on than I realized. Given what had already happened to me that day, I was leaning toward the second answer.

"How you doing, babe?" The voice was low and pleasant, but it caused me to jump. I had been so engrossed in thought that I hadn't seen anyone come in. I looked up to see a black man who appeared to be about thirty. He wore a neat light blue polo shirt and dark blue trousers.

"Can I help you?" I said, still startled.

"You sure can," he laughed, assuming I was joking with him. Then he leaned over my desk and before I could stop him, he pulled my head around and planted a big kiss on my lips. I was too shocked to resist, and if I have to be completely honest, it wasn't an entirely unpleasant experience. It somehow felt right to my body which began to tingle softly as our lips met.

This is my husband! I realized at once. It was the man in the picture of my family. I had been too startled to recognize him. This was the man I would be expected to... to...

"Rough day, babe?" he asked as he pulled back from the kiss.

"You can't imagine," I muttered. My husband! What was I going to do now? It was one thing to go through the motions of being Wanda Hazleton at work. Other than learning how to pee sitting down and keeping my skirt modestly in place, it wasn't that different from a day in my office back in Chicago. Oh sure, I felt different and I looked different, but it was easy to lose myself in whatever I was doing and not think about what had happened to me. Now, though, I would be expected to be 'the little woman.' I'd probably be expected to cook a meal and pick up after this man whose name I didn't even know and be affectionate... Affectionate! Oh my god, what if he wanted me to go to bed with him?

"Are you okay?" he asked with touching concern. I felt his hand softly on my shoulder.

"I'm fine," I lied, trying in that moment to collect myself. He was a good-looking man, I thought, realizing for the first time that with my change in sex, I was able for the first time in my life to appreciate a man's looks. He was tall and broad-shouldered. I was a little surprised at how big he was. Then I realized that as Jeff I had been about the same size as he. It was just from my new perspective, he looked very large. No wonder women were intimidated by men. Here I was, in the company of a man who presumably loved me; yet I felt intimidated by his size. He was real and not a shade, and he looked very solid. I had no doubt that if he wished, I would be physically powerless around him.

"I'll tell you what. I'll do the cooking tonight, how's that?" He gave me a gentle smile to go with the offer. Then he offered his hand to me.

Reflexively, I took his hand and stood up. "That would be great." I wasn't much of a cook, so it would give me a little time to figure out how to boil water without creating a culinary disaster. Well, I really

wasn't that bad, but I was sure Wanda's family had higher standards when it came to cooking than I had had as a man living alone. Then, before he released my hand, he pulled me to his body and the kissing started all over again.

I won't lie; it wasn't unpleasant. If I had been in my old body, I'm sure I would have been disgusted. Maybe I should have been anyway, but I wasn't. I was in a woman's body, and that body had urges which were outside the mental experience of Jeff Riley. Again, I took Cindy's advice and just let it happen. To my amazement, it actually felt good.

As we broke our kiss, the man smiled and said, "Come on, Carrie is probably driving Cindy crazy by now."

Carrie? Of course, the little girl in the picture in my purse.

My purse!

I barely remembered my purse, slipping the unfamiliar strap over my shoulder as I hurried to follow my new husband down the hall. In Cindy's office, I found a very attractive little girl of perhaps eight playing a card game on Cindy's computer as Cindy looked on in amusement. The little girl was that same coffee-color as me with straight black hair braided in long pigtails. She wore a feminine white T-shirt and jean shorts, and when she swung her slender legs, I could see white sandals flash by. She was not a shade; she was real. I wondered who she had been. Did she remember?

"Come on, Carrie, your mom's ready to go," my husband said.

"Oh, just one more game?" she wheedled, but she was already signing out of the game as if she knew what the answer would be.

"Not now," the man said. "Your mom's tired and you've got to help me make dinner."

I saw Cindy smile knowingly. Damn her; she was really enjoying this.

We walked out to a mid-sized Buick, fairly new, with Carrie telling me all about her day. I was confused at first, listening to stories about her day at day-care, but after a few minutes, it began to remind me of my conversations with Trisha and I soon found that I could follow along,

contributing where it seemed right.

Home turned out to be a modest ranch-style house on a pleasant tree-lined street. It was a mixed neighborhood, I noticed with both black and white families in evidence. I was pleasantly surprised. Back in Chicago, there were few such neighborhoods. Oh, there were well-to-do black families living in predominantly white neighborhoods in Chicago, but the more modest neighborhoods seemed to be either black or white.

My husband suggested I get out of my working clothes and into something more casual. I was happy to comply. Needless to say, I had never worn pantyhose before, and wearing them all day, I found them to be hot and a little sticky. I had balanced well enough on heels, but my feet longed for something less precarious. And as for the skirt, I was so tired of being modest all day that I could scream.

I dressed in a fashion similar to my new daughter. I had thought that at least I wouldn't look so feminine in shorts and a T-shirt. Silly me. Although my breasts were by no means huge, they certainly stuck out under the T-shirt, and there was nothing masculine about the long, black legs that showed prominently out of the short shorts. And I sighed in resignation as I noticed my toenails were now the same dark red as my fingernails. Well, I might not look like a man again, but at least I was more comfortable.

As I entered the kitchen, a little voice said, "Here, mommy," as she placed a frosty glass of iced tea in my hands.

"Thank you, Carrie," I said with what I hoped was a motherly smile. She really was a cute little thing. And like her father, she was real. Neither my new husband nor my new daughter seemed to have any memories of a previous life. I almost envied them. Wanda Hazleton seemed to have a pleasant, middle-class life. It was one many would envy. If I had no memories of being male and white, I would... I would what? I would settle back and enjoy this life? Why couldn't I do that now? I thought as I sipped the tea. The answer was simple: this wasn't me. I had been sent to Ovid as Jeff Riley, private investigator, on an assignment. Inside this pretty black head, I was still Jeff Riley

and hoped to always be him. I still had a job to do.

Of course, I realized my clients hadn't been entirely honest with me. Had they known about Ovid and what was likely to happen to me? Little things that Ridgeway had said made me believe that was the case. Ridgeway may have not known exactly what was going on, but I was sure his clients must. Why else would they have told Ridgeway to tell me that Peter Allison's appearance had likely been changed? But had they expected this to happen to me? But of course, if Little Georgie hadn't tried to kill me, none of this might have happened. The mysterious Judge and his associates might have just let me wander through Ovid and depart again. It was only after I was assaulted that they made their move.

I didn't get much time to think to myself. Dinner, in the form of delicious steaks perfectly grilled was soon served. Paul—for I had finally found his name in the wallet he had left on the dresser in our bedroom—had done an excellent job. Corn on the cob, also grilled, accompanied the steaks, and little Carrie brought a bowl of salad to the table.

It had been a long time since I had enjoyed a dinner as much as that one. Usually, dinner for Jeff Riley was a quick sandwich late in the evening on the way home from the office. Other than an occasional meal with one of my brothers' families, I usually ate alone. It was a bittersweet experience, though. I found myself sadly remembering the similar meals with Mary and Trisha. That had been real. They were my real family. This was nothing more than an elaborate play.

Having been a family man once before, the routine of family life was not all that alien to me. We cleaned up the kitchen after dinner and went for a walk in the late summer evening, stopping here and there to talk to neighbors, both black and white. It was a valuable activity for me, for I began to learn the names of the neighbors and a little about them. Most of them were nice, but I noticed one white couple—the Bronsons—were a little standoffish. They were both shades, and the two of them muttered stiff greetings as we passed. I noticed a white couple walking half a block behind us were given a more pleasant

greeting.

Paul just shook his head. "Some people just can't seem to get it right."

"What?"

"The race thing," he explained. "I even see it over at the College some days. I mean, they don't burn crosses in our yard anymore, but they still haven't figured out we've all got to get along."

Sad but true, I thought. "But it isn't just whites," I pointed out. I wondered what he did at the College—or for that matter, what college he was talking about.

"No, you're right," he admitted. "There's blacks who can't bring themselves to trust whites. Some of our people are still fighting their own version of the Civil War just as furiously as a Southern redneck."

I remembered a number of examples from my previous life. I had seen blacks that wouldn't even talk to a white police officer. I had been accused of being prejudiced by more than a few blacks just because I had arrested them for committing a crime. Maybe we're all just a little prejudiced. But it was more a function of unfamiliarity than fear or hatred. Now I was black. I had just experienced my first racial slight and I had to admit that I didn't like it. A few more incidents like that and I'd probably find myself just a little prejudiced against whites myself. And it wouldn't be because I was afraid or because I hated them. It would be because I couldn't be sure how they would react to me.

We got home just at dark. Carrie scooted to her room to get ready for bed. Soon, I would be alone with Paul, I realized. Would he expect me to have sex with him? If he did, could I do it? I was nearly beside myself with worry. What was it like? Did it hurt? Kissing Paul hadn't been that bad. Would I find that making love to him wasn't that bad either? That thought was almost the most disturbing one of all.

"G'night, Mommy," Carrie announced suddenly from the hall. "It's Daddy's turn to tuck me in."

"Good night, Pumpkin," I said reflexively, nearly biting my tongue

when I realized I had used the same name for her I had used for Trisha. As Paul jumped up to put her to bed, I hoped he hadn't noticed the sudden tears in my eyes.

He was back in a few minutes. Here it comes, I thought. Carrie's in bed; now it's time for Mommy and Daddy to play. But Mommy didn't feel like playing. I tried not to tense up when I felt Paul's arm around my shoulder. He leaned down and I could smell the musky smell of his after-shave. Then, there was a warm but gentle kiss and the arm slipped away as he rose back up. "I think I'll turn in early, too," he announced. "I've got a department meeting at seven in the morning. Can you take Carrie over to day-care?"

"Uh... sure," I answered, unsure as to how I would find her day-care center. I was also just a little disappointed if that makes any sense at all. As much as I dreaded making love to Paul, I had steeled myself up to it. It was almost like the first time I ever got up enough nerve to dive off a diving board. I couldn't have been any older than Carrie and I was just ready to dive in the water when a thunderclap caused the pool to be closed. I remember at the time that one moment I had been frightened half to death and the next moment I was disappointed and frustrated. But come to think of it, I had made a fine dive the next day and had enjoyed swimming ever since. Would sex be the same way?

Paul's departure for bed gave me some much-needed time alone. On a bookshelf, I found a copy of Bullfinch's *Mythology* and decided to spend the rest of the evening trying to figure out who the players were. It didn't take very long. The Judge was obviously in charge—Jupiter. Officer Mercer was almost certainly Mercury. But who was Hanes? That took a few more minutes, but the clues had all been there.

When I was a kid and spent a summer reading stories of mythology, I had been weaned on the children's version of the myths. For whatever reason, publishers apparently thought the full adult myths were either too complicated or too frightening for children. Very little is said of Jupiter's brothers, and Hanes had referred to the Judge as his brother. According to the book, Jupiter had two brothers who had worked with him to overthrow the Titans. After the conflict, Jupiter took dominion

over the lands, Neptune the sea, and Pluto the underworld. But Pluto wasn't so much a name as a description. It meant rich. It was apparently a reference to his dominion over the riches buried under the earth. Pluto had another name—a name seldom spoken. That name was Hades. Hanes—Hades. Hades, the Lord of the Underworld.

I shuddered. I had been raised a staunch Catholic; yet here I was, administrative assistant to a being who had probably evolved into our own Christian devil. I read on, but there was little written of Hades. He was feared rather than worshipped. His name was seldom spoken and then only in a whisper. He was cruel, unyielding, and pitiless. Many people think they have the boss from Hell. I really did.

So what was I going to do? I thought as I put the book back on the shelf. I was stuck, it appeared. I had no option but to live the life of Wanda Hazleton. Yet I wasn't ready to give in to that option yet. I had to sort some things out first.

So with that, I headed off for bed. Paul was already snoring away, and I realized that although I had avoided having sex, I would still be sleeping uncomfortably close to him. I left a light on in the bathroom and searched through the dresser in the dim light for something to wear to bed—hopefully something that revealed none of my new feminine charms. No such luck, though. Apparently, Wanda only bought sexy nightgowns. Everything was short and revealing. I looked over at Paul. Well, he was asleep. What he didn't know couldn't hurt me. I grabbed one that looked as if it might reach my knees and scrambled into the bathroom to put it on.

That was the first time I saw myself naked. I looked at myself in the mirror on the back of the bathroom door. I wasn't exactly Vanessa Williams, but I wasn't bad. My breasts seemed a little large, and the dark nipples a little pronounced. My hips were wide, but not unpleasantly so. As for my waist, considering the fact that I had apparently given birth to Carrie, I had recovered well. As for my face, I thought I looked a little like Anita Hill—younger of course but that same intelligent look that she had. I slipped the nightgown over my head and looked again. The gown was white and diaphanous. It did little to hide

my dark skin. If Paul were to see me in this, I'd learn what sex as a woman was like very quickly, I thought.

With that thought in mind, I was careful not to wake him. I slipped carefully into bed and huddled on my side looking away from him. I expected an arm around me, hugging my breasts tightly any moment, but the moment never came. He just snored peacefully away. Eventually, I drifted off to sleep.

I was awakened by the sound of running water in the shower. The sun was still nothing more than a yellow glow along the horizon. I looked at the clock. Six o'clock. It took me a moment—but only a moment—to remember what had happened to me.

The water stopped as I heaved myself out of bed. Heaving myself was a good description for it, because my weaker muscles and large breasts made the act of getting up very different. It wasn't just the void between my legs that reminded me that I was now a woman. It was a hundred different sensations. There was the feel of long hair flowing down my back, and flesh pooling at the hips, and the breasts shifting. Everything felt just a little different.

The bathroom door opened. Paul had a towel draped loosely around his waist but it did little to hide his body. He was in great shape, I thought. He had the look of a natural athlete. Like most blacks, he had fairly light chest hair, but he had some. I caught myself looking down at the gap in the towel, wondering...

"Good morning, babe!" he greeted me with a wide grin. "I hear Carrie. She's up and about. I'll get her set up with some breakfast before I go." Without warning, the towel dropped to the ground as he pulled a pair of boxers from a drawer. I got immediately nervous again. That was supposed to fit into my... my...

"You okay, babe?"

"Uh... sure, I'm fine." I looked away quickly, hoping he hadn't noticed. When I looked back, he had on a pair of boxers. I sighed in faint relief.

I made my way into the bathroom, sitting on the toilet. I had to get myself together. I was a woman now as the sudden flow of urine from the void between my legs seemed to emphasize. I couldn't have a stroke every time I saw Paul with his pants down. This just wasn't working out at all. Now I knew how a virgin bride feels on her wedding night.

I peeked out of the bathroom door when I finished, but Paul had already headed for the kitchen. I quickly located the drawer where Wanda kept her bras and panties and, remembering to select a matching set as I had seen Mary do, I retreated to the shower.

I had to overcome a powerful urge to explore my body in the shower. I even rationalized it by thinking that if I got myself off in the shower, I'd be more willing to spread my legs for Paul. I couldn't bring myself to do it though. I had a lot to do that day, and I didn't want any of it influenced by my first female orgasm. I got out of the shower and dried quickly, noticing how my more delicate skin seemed to be happier when I patted it rather than briskly rubbing it as I had when I was a man.

I selected an outfit similar to the one I had worn the day before, although this time, the suit was a bright red. Well, if I had to work for the devil, I might as well wear the team colors I told myself grimly.

Paul was just getting ready to leave when I got to the kitchen. His eyes went wide when he saw me. "Babe, you look great!"

I found myself flushing with pride. I had used Cindy's advice and just let my body do whatever it needed to do to get ready. My makeup had come out fine and I had managed to select all the right accessories for my outfit. If I had to remain Wanda for the rest of my life, at least I'd be able to look nice.

He gave me a hug and a chaste kiss, as if respectfully trying not to smear my makeup. "See you tonight. Carrie wants to stay over at Tanya's tonight. Maybe you and I can go someplace nice."

“Sure.” The only place nice I wanted to go was Chicago. After he was gone, I looked at Carrie. She was just finishing her cereal and toast, washing them down with a large glass of milk. It looked nauseating to me. Apparently Wanda wasn’t much of a breakfast person. I opted for a cold glass of orange juice which seemed to be all my body needed to get started.

I had the Buick for the day; Paul had taken another car—a new black Volkswagen. Whatever he did at the college must pay reasonably well, I thought. I belted Carrie in, realizing as I did that I had no idea where to take her.

“Let’s play a game,” I told her as I backed out of the garage.

“Sure, Mommy!”

“Let’s pretend I don’t know how to take you to day-care...”

Her face brightened. “Then I can play here all day?”

“No, Pumpkin,” I laughed, wondering not for the first time who she had been before Ovid. “I want you to show me how to get there.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” she laughed.

And it was. Ovid wasn’t a very large town. It turned out day care was in an African Methodist Church only a few blocks from the house. Of course, nothing seemed very far away in Ovid. After Chicago, most towns are small towns.

I walked her up to the door where she immediately found her friend Tanya, another pretty little black girl although a shade. Her mother, also a shade was standing with her. Together, we figured out the logistics for Carrie’s sleepover and I agreed to meet them at our house at five to get Carrie packed up.

The day-care, I noticed, consisted of all black children. I had never heard of the African Methodist Church, but it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that it was a predominantly black branch of the Methodist Church. I found myself wondering if it had been formed by blacks to remain apart from white Methodists or if white Methodists had encouraged its formation to keep the blacks away. I had as much

to learn about being black as I did about being a woman.

“Hi there.”

It was a woman’s voice. I turned and saw a woman, white with hair so red it seemed to be on fire. She wore a gray dress, short and revealing, and heels as high as mine in that same gray. Her jewelry was silver and expensive; her makeup perfect and understated. There was a smile on her lips, but it was countered by the dark look in her deep brown eyes. I felt as if I should know her from somewhere.

“It’s fascinating, isn’t it?” she said as she watched several children from the day-care center at play. “Here we are, two women, watching these children. If someone saw us, they’d think nothing of it. After all, we’re women—mothers and caregivers. Yet if we were two men standing here watching these children, someone would probably call the cops, assuming we were child molesters at the worst or fathers kidnapping their own children at the best.”

“That’s a little exaggerated, don’t you think?” I challenged her as I walked closer to her.

She shrugged. “Maybe, but maybe not. That’s what being human is all about, isn’t it? You can never be too sure how to tell the good guys from the bad guys.”

“So which are you?” I asked as I tried to fold my arms over my breasts.

“Me?” she grinned. “I’m one of the good guys, of course. Can’t you tell?”

“Do I know you?” I asked.

“We’ve met before,” she admitted, “but I didn’t look like this then. We met at your office in Chicago.”

The eyes. It was the eyes that gave her away. “Franklin Ridgeway?” I asked. “But it can’t be. He was...”

“A man?” she asked with a laugh. “Well, so were you then. But so you will understand, I was just using his image when we met. The real

Franklin Ridgeway has no idea he was successfully impersonated.”

I thought about my impressions of Ridgeway. I had been completely wrong. He hadn’t been a lawyer whose clients were withholding vital information from him. That had merely been an act to keep me from asking all the questions I wanted to ask. Whoever this woman was, she had powers not unlike those I had seen from the gods.

“Who are you? What are you?”

“Just call me... Erin,” she said enigmatically.

I grabbed her arm. Despite her soft appearance, it was almost like clutching a piece of granite. I released her arm and asked, “So what’s this all about? Just what is going on? I feel as if I’m being set up.”

“You were set up,” she admitted, “but we had no choice. This was the only way to insert you into Ovid.”

“Insert me?”

She nodded. “Yes. The Judge is very powerful as I’m sure you’ve come to realize. No one stays in Ovid without his concurrence. If we had sent you in here with full knowledge of what you were facing—even if you believed us—the Judge would have known at once. So we had to make you interesting to him.”

It dawned on me suddenly. “He left me alone until Little Georgie showed up. You were the one who ratted on me, weren’t you? You told him where I’d be!”

“You’re upset,” she observed. “You shouldn’t be, you know. You never would have gotten Little Georgie on your own. You had no idea he was really the one who killed your family. No court could have proved it—except the courts of Ovid, of course. We gave him to you, and the Judge allowed you to observe his punishment. A crow no less! How fitting for the little bastard.”

“So was any of the story you told me in Chicago true?” I asked.

“A good deal of it was,” she assured me. “Your mission is a real one.”

“But why should I carry it out now? I’m stuck here. I’ve changed

somewhat, or hadn't you noticed?"

She laughed again. "It doesn't have to be permanent. We can change you back, and we'll do so gladly as soon as you finish your mission. We want you to find Peter Allison for us."

"Just a minute," I said defiantly, trying to disguise my elation at the thought of being able to return to my male life. "I want to know who I'm working for. Just who are you and who are you working with? And if you have such powers, why can't you find him yourself?"

"So many questions," she sighed. "Very well, I'll tell you as much as I dare tell you. The Judge and his minions can track you, though. They have ways of intercepting your very thoughts, although they seldom do so until you've acclimated to your new identity. I haven't much time to tell you, either. I don't want to make you late to work. That might look suspicious and the Judge has a very good record of tracking our people down in Ovid. Now I have to be a little careful of what I say so as not to alert the Judge. To begin with, are you aware that in Roman and Greek myths, there was a civil war among the gods?"

"Yes," I replied. "I was reading about it last night."

"Have you ever wondered what happened to the losers in that war?"

"I assume they were killed," I told her. "I couldn't find any other reference to them."

"You can't kill a god, silly," she laughed. "Otherwise, it wouldn't be a god. By definition, gods are immortal."

"So you represent the losing side," I concluded sarcastically.

She paid no attention to the sarcasm. "They call us the 'Others.' They don't even dignify us with our true names."

"So why should I help you?" I asked. "Maybe I like it here. Maybe I don't want to be changed back."

She smiled and traced a finger along the back of my hand. "Nice try, but I don't believe that. Neither do you. You aren't this woman. You aren't black. You're an Irishman who wants to be a gumshoe in the

pulp magazine sense of the word. Besides, we're on your side."

"My side?"

"Humanity," she explained. "Their side wants to control you—to make you into little puppets like the people you see around you here in Ovid. That's why they changed you. They couldn't manipulate Jeff Riley, but they can control Wanda Hazleton every time you let down your guard. We offer you free choice—free will. Humanity has outgrown the need for us. If you help us find the man who stole from us, you can have your real life back—and you'll be helping the human race."

"And why are you being so benevolent to humanity?" I asked. "And don't tell me it's because you admire us so much."

"I wouldn't insult your intelligence on that point," she snorted. "No, you're right. We oppose them for other reasons—reasons of our own. But that is no less reason for us not to help humanity. Your slavery to them gives them strength. If they have no influence over you, they are weakened. That's reason enough to help humanity."

I had to admit there was something to her argument. It was the Judge who had changed my life—not Erin and her people, if I could call them people. I sighed. "Assuming I agree, what do you want me to do? I can't exactly go around town like Jeff Riley asking questions."

"No," she agreed, "you can't. But we know who you're working for. He is the one who controls all the written records on the population of Ovid. He's sort of like the Olympian version of the KGB. You can find out where Allison is."

"But I wouldn't know where to start," I protested. "There must be hundreds of people who've been changed here."

"Peter Allison disappeared only a few days ago," she admitted. "We told you it was longer so you would not wonder why we didn't wait for the authorities to find him. As you probably know by now, once you have a new identity in Ovid, your identity in the real world ceases to exist. There are exceptions, but not many. As far as the authorities are concerned, there is no Peter Allison. Whoever he is, he has been here

not more than a week. And he undoubtedly remembers who he was. That narrows it down to a handful of possibilities—no more than four or five.”

“And Hanes has the records?”

She nodded. “Yes, but only the records of current identities. Only the Judge has the records of prior identities and that blonde bitch who works for him would never let you see them. It will be up to you to determine who Peter Allison has become.”

“And if I do?” I demanded. I was a little annoyed with her description of Cindy as a ‘blonde bitch.’ I considered her a friend.

“Then all of this will be just an unpleasant memory. I can even make you forget it if you prefer. And, you will have a nice bonus. We can arrange many things for our friends. This time, we plan to be on the winning side.”

“I’ll think about it,” I told her. “If I need to, how can I contact you?”

“Call me at this number,” she replied, thrusting a business card into my hand. I looked at it quickly. Printed on it was simply a phone number. It was the same number she had given me when she had been Ridgeway. “If I haven’t heard from you by Monday morning, I’ll be right here. Think quickly, though,” she cautioned as I turned away. “Time is a factor.”

I put the card in my purse and turned away. I turned back to say something to her, but there was no one there. I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was the only player in the game without any chips. Should I do what she asked? If I wanted my real life back, it was probably the only option. If I found their embezzler today I could get back to reality before sundown. I need never again put on lipstick or pantyhose or prance around in heels. And most importantly, I need never know what it was like to have a man’s dick between my legs.

On the other hand, I was up against very powerful beings. I knew from watching Little Georgie’s transformation that there were far worse things than being changed into an attractive black woman. If I guessed

wrong, or if I was caught, the consequences could be devastating—even fatal.

But it wouldn't hurt to do a little poking around, I thought as I drove to City Hall. I might not have any chips now, but maybe I could find a way to buy my way into the game.

I wasn't sure who showed up for work in my office that day. It might have been Wanda Hazleton, wife, mother, and administrative assistant to one of the most powerful beings in Ovid. Or, on the other hand, it might have been Jeff Riley, private investigator in extreme drag, doing his assignment. I was sure I wanted to be Jeff Riley again. I wasn't sure why. He didn't have the best of lives. But I had been him for thirty some-odd years and I was rather used to him. But at what cost? Who would I be working for?

Erin had to be telling me the truth—or at least most of it—this time. They really wanted Peter Allison. There was no doubt about that. Had he really taken thirty million dollars from them? I didn't know, but whatever he had done, he had pissed off some powerful folks in the process. Of course, maybe he had made some other powerful friends at the same time. And he almost had to be in Ovid. I was certain Erin and her associates had made sure of that. Whatever powers the Judge and his gang had seemed to be mirrored by the Others.

And who were the Others? I had read about the civil war of the gods, but what had happened to the losers? Erin had said they weren't dead. I wasn't sure any of the off-the-shelf books on mythology in the public library would have much to say on the matter. It could be that such information had never been recorded.

Did I dare do any of my research perched outside Hades' door? For some reason, I didn't think he was in. There was a 'feeling' I had noticed the day before whenever he was in his office—or at least I assumed it was while he was in his office. I didn't feel that feeling now. Maybe Cindy would know.

"Good morning!" she said cheerfully when she saw me at her door. It was hard to believe that such a vivacious, attractive blonde woman

had ever been a man. But I suppose it would be hard for others to imagine that a certain attractive black woman had ever been a man either. “How was your first night?”

“Quiet,” I said with a meaning she understood.

“That’ll change,” she replied with a wagging arch of her eyebrows.

“Cindy,” I began, trying to ignore her innuendo, “what can you tell me about Mr. Hanes?”

Her look became serious. “Not much. We all try to avoid him as much as possible. Most of the... powerful people around here are nice—even the Judge. But Mr. Hanes is... distant.”

“That’s putting it politely,” I observed.

“Yes, well, he seldom comes out of his office, and no one has ever seen him leave the building—at least not by the front entrance.”

“So how does he get out?”

To my surprise, she laughed. “Think about it, Wanda. Did you know that if you walk outside and look at where his office should be, all you’ll see is a patch of grass with a few bushes on it? By all rights, there should be nothing beyond the wall behind your chair. Trying to find the answer to questions like that will drive you up a wall. Believe me, when I first got here, I looked for all sorts of answers. Most of the ones I found just led to more questions.”

“I’d better get back to my desk,” I told her, sensing suddenly that my boss had arrived. “One more quick question. What makes you think the... powerful people are the good guys?”

She looked at me oddly for a moment. “I just... feel it, I guess. Call it women’s intuition if you want to.”

I was right: Mr. Hanes was in his office, and he barked for me to come in the moment I got back to my desk.

“Where were you?” he demanded. It seemed to be his standard greeting for me.

“I was in Cindy’s office,” I explained with a calm voice that belied how I really felt.

“I want you here during working hours,” he said curtly.

“What if I have to go to the bathroom?” I asked, but the sarcasm was lost on him.

“If you must,” he allowed, his lip curled as if the very thought of having to defecate was repugnant to him. Did the gods have to go to the bathroom? That was something I’d probably never know.

“Now here,” he said, handing me a small stack of papers. “See that these are typed and distributed before you go home.”

I took the papers from him and departed, hoping that I could get it all done in time to get Carrie packed up for her sleepover. There was a fair amount of work, even when I let myself go into automatic mode to type. Fortunately, one of the other girls down the hall ordered out for lunch, so I was able to work straight through. I could feel my boss in his office. It was just an uncomfortable feeling as if someone was looking over my shoulder. By mid-afternoon, the feeling was gone, but I continued typing away. I had to get Carrie ready.

I was learning the hard way what many women could have probably told me. When you’re a working mother, you are a slave to everyone else’s schedule, and no one understands why you weren’t able to handle their tasks first. Had it been this way for Mary? Probably, it was. Mary had always been there for Trisha it seemed, even when I couldn’t be there. I was a cop after all. My work was important. Had Mary been angry with me because she had to pick up the slack for me with Trisha? Was I angry with Paul for the same reason?

No, I was angry with Paul because I knew that sooner or later—probably sooner if he was like most men—I’d have to spread my legs for him. Now that would be the perfect ending to a perfect day. After being chewed out by my boss, working my little black butt off, and running around for Carrie, I had an evening of being poked and prodded to look forward to.

And then there was Erin. Could she really change me back as promised? It was a little hard to trust someone who had gotten me into this fix to start with. How could I accomplish it anyhow? Erin had said Hanes had the records of current identities. And I could sense when he was gone. I could always sneak in his office and look for them. Did I dare?

Carefully, I opened his office door. Although I expected him to be gone, I still breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that I was right. I had an excuse to be there. I had just finished all of his reports, so I could always say that I was dropping finished copies off for him.

Okay, now that I was in his office, how would I find the information I was looking for? Presumably, many of the files were in Latin. Then I remembered that the Romans used a calendar somewhat similar to our own. Perhaps there was a date file. I checked a row of filing cabinets along the far wall. Yes, there were files in date sequence. Hurriedly, I pulled open a file drawer. In the drawer were files arranged by subject within date. Unfortunately, as I had expected, they were in Latin.

I knew a little Latin. Most good Catholic boys did. Also, being a cop meant that I knew many legal terms derived from the Latin. I wasn't sure what the Latin for 'law' was, but any file starting with 'juris' was probably a close match. To my dismay, there was more than one for the time period I sought. A quick look at most of them showed what looked like normal civil proceedings. Then, my search was rewarded. A small, thin file listed several names. I took the sheet for later study, hoping that even if by chance it was missed, it would be chalked up to a clerical error. I'd make a copy of it as quickly as I could.

I slipped the sheet of paper into the waistband of my skirt, thankful that I had chosen to wear a suit rather than a dress. The thought of stuffing the paper down the front of a dress into my unfamiliar cleavage was too trite to consider.

Now, any reasonable person—and I like to think that usually includes me—would have hurried out of that office as fast as their high-heeled shoes could have carried them. But at the heart of it all, I was a private

detective—a snoop. My curiosity got the best of me. If this office wasn't really 'there' as Cindy had warned me, where was it?

I looked at the carefully-drawn blinds, seeing the thin rays of sunlight that found their way into the room. Carefully, I pulled the blinds back. The pattern of light on the carpet changed, but it was as if the light came from some other source, for it most certainly did not come through the window. I would never have expected to find what I found beyond the window. The best way to describe it was that I found... nothing.

I remembered suddenly an experience I had had as a child. My parents had taken my brothers and me to the Southwest on a camping vacation. We had stopped at Carlsbad Caverns and taken the tour. There, deep below the surface, they had turned out the lights to show us how unbelievably dark the caverns truly were. Not even the tiniest particle of light had registered on my eyes that day. It was like that now. Through the window was darkness—a blackness that allowed no light to exist. With a gasp, I dropped the blinds back into place.

"Have you satisfied your curiosity?" Mr. Hanes' voice asked ominously from behind me. I hadn't heard him come in, and I was so shocked by what I had found behind the blinds that my sixth sense regarding his presence had failed me.

"I..." I tried to begin, but I could think of nothing to say.

"Don't worry," he said softly, surprising me with his lack of anger, "I expected you to do that eventually. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

I didn't answer, but I don't think he expected me to.

"Not what you expected, is it?" he asked, pulling up the blinds so I could see the darkness again. "I know. You were expecting red fires and demons with pitchforks and the screaming of souls being punished, weren't you? You were expecting your childishly simple Hell. I'm sorry to disappoint you. My domain is far more complex than you could ever imagine. I have decided that my view should be of one of its more intriguing regions. It's called Tartarus. Have you ever heard of it?"

Silently, I shook my head. I was looking at the darkness still unable to speak.

“It’s a very special region,” he explained, sounding like a proud homeowner explaining the important features of his dwelling. I suppose that’s what he was actually doing. His voice was soft, almost loving in tone. “It lies below the Underworld, although ‘below’ is a relative term, I suppose. You could dig to the center of the Earth and still not reach it, for it is really in another space and time.”

I could sense something out there in the void—something large and ominous. It was like the feeling I remembered when I was a little boy visiting an aunt who had an old, dark house. It was as if there was something alive in the darkness of her house, and it was as if there was something alive in the darkness of Tartarus.

“You can feel them, can’t you?” he asked soothingly. “They call out to us all, but some are more sensitive to their entreaties. Listen to them for a moment. Hear what they are saying.”

I strained to hear, but could not make out the words. I could somehow sense their tone, though. There were many voices, some deep and resonant, others high and feminine like my own. One moment, they seemed to be crying out in pain, begging for mercy—then the next moment, they threatened, causing shivers up and down my back.

“They must remain here for eternity,” he explained.

“Who are they?” I asked, barely able to find my voice. I hated myself for doing it, but I found I had actually backed into Mr. Hanes and found comfort in his touch. I could never remember being more frightened of anything in my life.

“They are the Old Ones,” he told me.

“I seem to remember a little of my mythology,” I said slowly. “They were called... Titans?”

“Yes,” he agreed, “they are the Titans. There are others with them as well—others whose names humans have never spoken. They cannot die; they can only be contained.” With that, he shut the blinds, and the

feeling of dread that had been building inside me ebbed at last. He turned me to face him and looked piercingly into my eyes. "So now you understand why you must come in this office only when I am here. They made you curious. They caused you to open the blinds. Had I not been here, you would have been made to listen to their pleas, and you might have tried to help them."

He picked up the reports that I had placed on his desk. "These are acceptable," he declared. "That is all I have for you today. You may go home."

He didn't have to tell me twice. I rushed for the door.

"And Wanda..."

I turned toward him. "Yes?"

"Remember—always—what you have seen here today."

I would, I thought as I closed the door behind me. I now knew what Erin was trying to tell me when she had spoken with me that morning. Had she known what I would see that day? Yet according to her, it was the good guys who had been locked away, while Hanes and the Judge represented the other side. I had to admit, although I had been fearful in Mr. Hanes' office, I had not sensed evil. Whatever was beyond that room was neither good nor evil: it just... was.

But what did that mean to me? According to Erin, the Judge and his ilk sought to control humanity. Did they? I couldn't be sure. I did know one thing, though: if I came down on the side of the Others, I might regain my manhood. They were offering me the chance to recover my real life. If I did nothing, it was the same as supporting the Judge, and I would remain Wanda Hazleton for the rest of my life. My fingers touched the paper I had tucked into my skirt. It wouldn't hurt to check the names out, I thought. Then I could decide what to do.

I didn't dare look at the list until I was safely in my car. There were five names on the list. Four of them meant nothing to me, but the fifth was familiar. It was a 'Misty Stafford.' Sly had called the redhead at the bar 'Misty,' and now that I thought about it, she hadn't looked too happy—

almost as if she wasn't used to being a waitress in a bar. It was worth a shot. I had an hour or so before I had to get Carrie, so I decided to start with Misty.

I began to reconsider my decision the minute I walked into Randy Andy's. When I had last been there, I was just another guy in a bar on a slow night. Now, it was Friday afternoon, and the bar was obviously gearing up for a big night. The problem was that like most bars, there were a lot more men than women. Here I was, a pretty black woman in a skirt and heels, and to my dismay, it seemed as if all eyes turned on me. Now I knew what a turkey felt like the day before Thanksgiving.

"Look at that!"

"Mmmm... tasty!"

"Look, Stan, dark meat!"

Those were just the comments I managed to hear clearly, the last from two guys a couple of bar stools away from where I had nervously sidled up to the bar to talk to the only familiar person in the room—Sly. She was picking up an order at the bar from a weasel-faced bartender. She looked at the two clowns at the bar, and said to the one who had made the last comment, "Look, Larry, if it's meat you want, why don't you go into the men's room and slap yours around for a while?"

Larry looked suddenly embarrassed while his friend, Stan, laughed loudly.

Sly looked at me. "Do you need something, Honey?"

So I was a honey now. Great. "Sly, I need to talk to Misty."

"She's not here today," Sly told me. "That's the only reason I'm here."

I almost forgot about the wolves staring at me. "Not here? Why not?" Had she run? Was she my man—woman?

Sly laughed, "She turned her ankle. Let's just say she hasn't worn heels much."

Did Sly know? I had to find out. “Maybe she’s used to wearing different shoes—and other things,” I ventured.

Sly looked at me carefully. “Do I know you?”

“I was here a couple of nights ago asking questions,” I said.

To my embarrassment, she laughed even harder. “Oh, this is too good. Look, we’re busy, but I can talk for a minute. Let me deliver these drinks and I’ll meet you in the storage room. It’s back beyond the restrooms.”

I was relieved to get away from the bar. Two more guys tried to put the moves on me as I made my way to the storage room. I was beginning to understand why few women hung out alone in bars. I had never really appreciated the freedom being male conferred on me, but I was learning. This would be my only foray into a bar by myself.

“I don’t have much time,” Sly said, closing the door behind her. She took a moment to look at me carefully. Then she smiled. “Well, Mr. Riley, I warned you about Ovid. I see you’ve met the Judge.”

“It’s Wanda now,” I replied, suddenly a little uncomfortable being called Mr. Riley. “Wanda Hazleton.”

“Married, too, I see,” Sly noted, nodding at the ring on my finger. “Well, welcome to Ovid. What can I do for you?”

“I still need information,” I sighed.

“Why? Odds are your client doesn’t even remember hiring you.”

“Let’s just call it an obsession,” I said. “I need to know. Misty was just changed, right?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Yes, but how did you know that?”

“I came across a list,” I told her. “It has the names of everyone changed in the last week. But I don’t know anything except the names. I thought the Misty here at the bar might be the one I’m after.”

“I doubt it,” Sly mused, shaking her head. “The word is she was a guy but nothing like the guy you’re looking for. She remembers who she

was, but she clams up when I try to talk to her about it. She was a supposedly liquor salesman—a big fat guy, balding and about fifty. I might be able to help you with the list, though. And there's always the phone book, you know."

"But they were just changed," I pointed out.

"So were you, but I'll bet you're in the phone book."

I felt like a fool. Of course she was right. I was new to Ovid, but as far as most people were concerned, I had been here for a long time. So had my suspects. I showed Sly my list. She actually knew two of them. Both were men who came in for a beer every now and then.

"I doubt if it's them," Sly told me. "I've talked to them. Neither one of them remembers who he was before."

"You're sure?"

She shrugged. "I suppose they could be lying, but I doubt it. You'll see what I mean after you've been here for a while. The newcomers always seem a little uncomfortable for a few days if they remember who they were."

Like me, I thought. She seemed to read my thoughts. "Just like you."

"It shows, huh?"

"Yes, it shows," she laughed with an encouraging squeeze of my arm. "You're still trying to be the tough private detective. I'm sorry, honey, but it doesn't work. Take my advice: try to play what you are. If you look like an attractive black woman, try to act like one. Odds are good you'll learn more about your suspects that way than trying to be Sam Spade." She colored suddenly. "Look, I'm sorry. I meant 'spade' like in the Bogart movies. I didn't mean..."

It was actually my turn to laugh. "No offense taken. I guess I've been a black woman for such a short time that I didn't think to take offense."

"Well, okay," she said, mollified. Then, after a silent moment, she added, "Look, Wanda, I know you probably don't want to hear this, but take it from me. What has happened to you may be the best thing you

could ever hope for.”

“Being turned into a woman? A black one at that?”

“When I got here and got changed, I was really pissed,” she went on. “I mean, I had what I thought was a good life. I’ll tell you about it some time. But now, I wouldn’t trade my life here for that old one for anything. Ovid is a great place to be. You can start over, have a family...”

I winced a little at that. Were Paul and Carrie really my family? Or were they just cardboard cut-outs representing a life that might be pleasant enough but wasn’t really mine?

“I’ll give it some thought,” I promised.

I had spent all my free time with Sly. Now, it was time to go play mom. I rushed over and picked up Carrie who regaled me all the way home with her eventful day. “And I made this for you,” she said proudly as she handed me a card while we were stopped at a light. I looked at it. It was a greeting card drawn on a computer. “To the Best Mom in the whole World!” it said in bright red letters in front of a colorful rainbow.

“That’s very pretty, honey,” I told her, finding I really was touched. I could remember when Trisha had done one similar to it.

“I mean it, too,” she said seriously.

“I know you do,” I replied, equally seriously. Then, slowly, I said, “I love you, too.” It almost hurt to say it. Did I mean it? I wasn’t sure, but I knew she expected me to say it. Trisha was the same way, and Carrie was so much like Trisha in so many ways...

I got Carrie ready to go and waved as she rode away with her little friend. I had no time to think about anything else though, because Paul was in the driveway within five minutes of Carrie’s departure.

He had a hand behind his back and a big smile on his face. Then, with a flourish, he whipped his hand out, producing a bouquet of a dozen pink roses. “In celebration of our evening alone,” he explained with a lecherous grin.

Now, I had been a husband before, and I knew where this was all supposed to lead. First, it was flowers. Then would come dinner and drinks at a nice restaurant. Then, it would be time to pay the piper. I would be expected to happily spread my legs for this man. I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't sure I would ever be ready for it.

But I had a part to play, I realized. Sly was right. I couldn't go around acting like the man I used to be. To nearly everyone—Paul included—I was Wanda Hazleton, wife and mother. I had no choice but to be Wanda—for now at least. So I forced a smile and accepted the flowers, sniffing them as I had often seen Mary do. “They're beautiful.”

The smile became still wider. “I have seven-thirty reservations at Winston's. Why don't you slip into that little black number I like and I'll put on a coat and tie?”

What choice did I have? It was obvious when I looked in the closet which dress he was talking about. It was the proverbial little black dress, short, revealing and decidedly feminine. With a sigh, I pulled it off the hangar. It was time to turn on the old cruise control and get ready for my first date.

It was a good thing I did. Jeff wouldn't have had a clue how to put together all the pieces of the outfit Wanda ended up wearing that night. I observed myself getting ready, resisting the temptation to interfere as I deftly selected a necklace and earrings as well as matching bracelets. For stockings, I shocked myself when I selected a garter belt to go with my black bra and panties. Whoa, Bessie! What was I doing to myself? It was bad enough that I'd probably have to go for a roll in the hay with Paul after dinner. This outfit was guaranteed to get me raped!

I nearly stopped myself right then and there, but in a curious way, I was fascinated with the whole thing. I had a major decision to make shortly. I needed to decide if I was going to work for Erin and her side or not. If I did, I could get my old life back. But what did working for them mean? Was my old life important enough—or desirable enough—to risk angering the gods? And then there was Sly. She had obviously gone through the same process I was enduring. She even claimed to

have a good life before her transformation. Yet she was happy now—as a waitress in a bar no less. Would I be?

I had to give being Wanda a fair chance. If I didn't, I'd never know if I was making the right decision or not. The only way I could do that was to play out the evening as a happy wife. I don't know which I feared more—that I wouldn't like sex as a woman or that I would.

The evening was what I expected—and more. Paul was a gentleman of the first order. He escorted me as if I were a princess, opening doors for me and taking my arm. I was really grateful for that since the heels I was perched on were the highest I had worn yet.

I felt exposed at first as we stepped into Winston's, a surprisingly well-appointed restaurant for such a small town. Here I was dressed to the nines. I had spent what seemed like an eternity with my makeup and my clothes until everything looked just right, and there was enough man left in me to know that I had done an excellent job on myself, for I was very attractive. But I was also wearing a dress that prominently displayed my breasts, and the skirts I had worn before exposed considerably less leg. My arms were bare and I could actually feel a little draft on my back. I was suddenly thankful for long hair, which covered at least a portion of it.

We smiled and spoke to several couples already dining. I was a little relieved to notice that we were accepted members of the community. I had been a little concerned that our race would make us unwelcome in some quarters of Ovid. Fortunately, that didn't seem to be the case.

We were seated in a somewhat secluded part of the room where we were able to have a little privacy—or as much privacy as a couple ever has in a restaurant. I found it to be immensely enjoyable. Paul was an intelligent man. I managed to figure out during dinner that he taught sociology at Capta College, a small liberal arts school in Ovid. Yet in spite of a doctorate in the field, he never talked down to me, respecting my opinion on subjects as the evening progressed.

I had to admit to myself that I hadn't had as much fun talking to someone since my days with Mary. I'm convinced that the true secret

to a successful marriage is the ability to talk to your partner as an intellectual equal. The ability to carry on a conversation with one's partner is a relationship. Anything else is just sex.

Mostly, we talked about mundane things: family, friends, our jobs. Of course, I hadn't had the chance to make friends yet except for Cindy and, I suppose, Sly. As for my job, well, I was certainly prohibited from telling him I worked for Hades. So we talked about his job mostly. Capta College sounded like a nice little college, and it was obvious that Paul was very happy there.

"Which reminds me," he said as we finished the last of our dessert and coffee, "I have a luncheon with the President of the College tomorrow. It won't take long though if you and Carrie still want to go out to Sunset Beach."

"Sure," I answered agreeably. Of course, I had never mentioned Sunset Beach, but it sounded all right to me. I was pretty mellow from the wine we had shared at dinner. I wasn't used to wine or mixed drinks, being primarily a beer drinker, and I had drunk just a little too much. My smaller size made the effect of the alcohol greater, and I have to admit I probably drank more than I should to dampen the fear of what I was sure was still to come that evening.

I was as prepared for sex as I could manage to be. I have to admit that in a perverse sort of way I was actually looking forward to it. It represented an obstacle I would have to overcome if I remained Wanda Hazleton. And many women seemed to enjoy sex—Mary did. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

Paul's arm was around me as we walked out together. Given the wine I had consumed, I appreciated the extra support. But more than that, I found my body was responding to his closeness. My nipples and my crotch both seemed to tingle mildly. I seemed to crave his warmth and his strength.

So it came as no surprise to me that we didn't even bother to turn on the lights when we got home. We were in each other's embrace the minute we stepped in the house. The tingling I had felt before was

becoming more and more insistent. I began to feel warm, and it wasn't just the closeness of our two bodies.

I'm not sure what was going through my mind at that moment. I know I wasn't on cruise control because I was willing myself to touch him all over as he was touching me, our hands conducting a symphony of flesh as we peeled each other's clothing away. I do know that whatever rational thoughts I was having were being pushed aside by the sudden needs of my new body. I was experiencing a feeling of emptiness which had to be abated, and the solution was obvious.

I slipped down onto the bed. The covers had been pulled back, but I didn't remember doing it. I felt my large, fleshy ass sinking down into the mattress and my long hair spreading across the pillow. Paul was careful not to put all of his weight on me, wordlessly slipping over me. I felt something rubbing against me, tentatively at first but soon harder. There was a friction against my flesh and I knew instinctively that he had begun to stimulate my clitoris.

I felt as if my body was turning to liquid, starting between my legs. Each movement seemed to produce more fluid from my body until I felt something solid invading the inner sanctum of my body. The feeling of emptiness was subsiding, but another feeling was beginning. It was a feeling unlike anything I had ever known before, and it seemed to be felt in several parts of my new body at once, rising until... until... Oh God! Is this what it's like?

We slept in Saturday morning, and with good reason. I almost lost count of how many times we made love together that night. We would awaken still naked in each other's arms, and the need would rise again. It wasn't an orgy; it was gentle. Following my initial insistent foray into sex as a woman, our subsequent efforts were more relaxed and protracted. How could I have ever dreaded something so pleasurable? I wondered the next morning. I even considered waking Paul for one more round before we got up.

This didn't mean that I had completely given up my interest in returning to my previous life. Far from it. But it did mean that if I chose to remain in this new life, it would have its own compensations. But I

wasn't sure I could continue to work for Mr. Hanes. It was like working for the devil, and the Catholic boy who still wandered around inside my head was unhappy with that prospect.

I slid out of bed, careful not to wake Paul who continued to snore contentedly. I still couldn't tell the good guys from the bad guys, I realized as I took my morning shower. There seemed to be nothing sinister about Ovid. It was the perfect small town—the sort of place where neighbors helped each other out and children grew up healthy and happy. Even Mr. Hanes wasn't really so bad. He might resemble the Catholic devil with his power over the underworld, but there seemed to be nothing evil about him. Not once had I seen him rush gleefully into the office with the contract for someone's hapless soul.

And yet Erin claimed she was one of the good guys, I thought as I soaped my soft curvaceous body. She made it sound as if the gods sought to control and dominate humanity. But it was her side who had made me a cat's-paw. A black cat's-paw, I thought with grim humor.

I looked down at my body as I rinsed. The black skin, prominent breasts, and furry mound between my legs seemed almost normal to me now. I had washed myself off without a thought, and now, I was preparing to wash my long hair as if I had done it a thousand times before. If I did what the Judge expected of me and acted like a good little girl, this would be my life forever.

And was it so bad? No, it wasn't. It wasn't a life I would have chosen for myself, but it wasn't a bad life. In fact, everything felt suddenly... right. When I looked at my body, I saw a person. I saw myself. This was going to make the decisions that followed all the harder.

The rest of the morning was a portrait of domesticity. I made breakfast for Paul and me. We read the papers and did a few chores. Carrie had called right after I got out of the shower and asked for permission to stay at her friends until early afternoon. Then she had talked me into taking them both to some place called Sunset Beach in the afternoon. A beach in Oklahoma? I knew it was there. Cindy had shown me the pictures, but it seemed as out of place as a small town run by the gods.

As soon as Paul left for his lunch meeting, I grabbed the phone book. I needed to check out the last two names on my list. I had reached the conclusion that even if I decided not to cooperate with Erin and her side, I wanted to know who Peter Allison had become. It was a mystery and I was still a detective—sort of. I wouldn't be happy until I knew who Peter Allison had become. Although I was becoming more and more convinced that once I knew, I would keep the information to myself. I just couldn't bring myself to trust Erin's 'employers.' And, if I admitted it to myself, a couple more nights like the last one and I'd have absolutely no desire to change back.

Jim DeLong turned out to be a sixteen-year-old boy with his own phone. A very awkward short conversation with revealed that he knew nothing of who he had been before. The little prick even tried to make a date with me sight unseen. That left me with one name on the list. It would come down to the last name. I decided to see Lisa James in person.

Lisa was home, although it wasn't much of a home. Her home was a rundown little house in one of the less prosperous parts of Ovid. As I approached the small house, I couldn't help but think even a coat of paint would make things look better and might make visitors forget the weed-infested, junk-filled yard. There was the smell of something cooking as I approached the door—something cheap and pungent. I could hear the screams and yells of what seemed to be a house full of children.

Lisa James looked as if she had seen better days. With a little makeup, her hair washed and set, and a decent outfit, she would have been attractive, but she exhibited none of those things when she answered the door, a filthy baby in only a diaper crying in her arms. Her hair was vaguely blonde and stringy. She wore a tank top and cut-offs that displayed a reasonably good figure, but if she continued to eat whatever she was cooking, the figure wouldn't be good for long. Her lack of makeup made her look older, but I estimated her age at no more than thirty. Two other children, neither more than five, ran unsupervised through her tattered, untidy living room. All the children

were shades.

“Yes?” she said in a tired voice.

“Ms. James?”

“Yeah,” she replied with suspicion. “You from the county?” Her voice had a nasal twang that made my own Oklahoma drawl sound absolutely Fifth Avenue.

“The county?”

“Welfare,” she explained.

I was momentarily taken aback until I realized what she meant. I suppose it was a reasonable assumption. Why else would a black woman in even a casual skirt and blouse like I was wearing show up on the doorstep of someone like Lisa James on a Saturday morning.

“Uh... no,” I managed to respond. “I’m just doing an investigation. I’d like to talk to you about... about...” For some reason, I couldn’t get it out. It was as if my voice had frozen.

Lisa seemed to understand. She deftly handed the baby to one of the other children. I think the child was a girl, but it was hard to tell. “You take your little brother Jed in and change him.”

“Ma!”

“None of your back talk,” she said sternly. “Now git!”

Oh, there was no way this was Peter Allison, I thought to myself as the two children hurried out of the room, awkwardly carrying the crying baby.

“There,” she said when they were gone. “Now we can talk about it. It’s them rules, you know. We can’t talk about the changes with more than two of us in earshot.” She sat on a worn couch as primly as she could. She only succeeded in looking tired.

“Then you remember who you were?” I asked, sitting in what appeared to be the least dirty chair.

“Oh, I remember,” she laughed mirthlessly. “I just wish I didn’t.”

“I’m looking for Peter Allison,” I told her. “Were you...?”

She nodded slowly. “Hell of a note, ain’t it? They did this to me. They took all the money I had and made me into this. I thought I’d be able to buy myself a good life here with what I brought them. Fat chance, huh? They took all the money—every dime! And what did they do for me? They give me these three little rug rats, an eighth grade education, and a husband that ain’t been seen since little Jed was still in the pouch—or so I’m told. To make it all worse, I can’t talk except like this. Ain’t that a kick in the pants?”

“I’m... I’m sorry,” I offered.

“T’warnt your fault,” she muttered. “Sides, looks like you ain’t got it the best either. I’ll bet you weren’t no black gal afore you got here.”

“No... no, I wasn’t,” I admitted. But I thought to myself how fortunate I was to be Wanda Hazleton after seeing what had happened to Peter Allison. In fact, even without seeing what had happened to Allison, I was beginning to feel I had been given an incredible gift when I became Wanda Hazleton.

“They’re after me, ain’t they?” Lisa asked.

“They?”

“Don’t be coy,” she growled. “The Others. They sent you. If you ain’t from welfare and ain’t one o’ them that run this place, you gotta be workin’ for the Others. I know who they are. Well, you just tell ’em to come and get me. I’ll be glad to see ’em. With any luck, they’ll just kill me and be done with it. It’s gotta be a damned sight better than this.”

I rose unsteadily to my feet and pulled my purse up on my shoulder. It had nothing to do with the heels I wore. I was horrified with what had happened to Peter Allison. I think it was the realization that it could have just as easily been me standing there in all that squalor with that life. For the first time since my conversion, I was absolutely thankful to be Wanda Hazleton. Mumbling a quick thank you, I rushed out of the house.

So I had my man—or rather my woman—I thought as I got into shorts

and a T-shirt for the afternoon at the beach. Now what was I going to do about it? I had realized I could be happy as Wanda Hazleton, but I hadn't made up my mind completely. Should I turn Allison over to the Others? It seemed as if I would almost be doing her a favor. Besides, what would it hurt? The money was gone, so that wasn't an issue. I could be Jeff Riley again...

But what would the Others do with Peter—or rather, Lisa? It seemed as if as bad as her life was, it was probably better than what the Others would do to her. If they were being honest with me, they could change her into something far worse than a welfare mother. And I would be responsible.

I had a little time to consider what I was to do. Obviously, the former Peter Allison wasn't going anywhere. He'd keep until I decided what I was going to do. Of course, Erin was going to be most displeased when she found that the money she sought was already gone. I extracted the card she had given me from my purse and looked at the number. It would be so simple to dial the number and complete my assignment. Then I could go home. So what was stopping me?

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard the door slam and the running of little feet. "Mommy, aren't you taking us to the beach?" Carrie asked when she and her friend Tanya saw me.

"Sure, I told you I would," I replied.

"Then why aren't you in your bathing suit?"

Bathing suit? It was bad enough to display what I had already displayed in public, but now I was expected to show even more skin? I wasn't ready for that—not yet.

"Wear the yellow bikini!" Carrie insisted. "You look hot in that!"

"Carrie!" I cried, trying hard not to laugh.

"Yeah, wear the yellow bikini!" a deep voice laughed. It was Paul. I hadn't heard him come in. "After that boring luncheon, I need to see my woman in a yellow bikini."

I don't know why, but the more I thought about that, the more I was

rather curious to see what I would look like in that yellow bikini. If both my provided husband and daughter thought I'd look great in it, I was beginning to warm to the idea.

Carrie was right, too—I did look hot. Standing in front of a full-length mirror, I had to admit that I was a very attractive woman. The bright yellow bikini was just the right accent for my dark skin. It fit me like a second skin, displaying my breasts and hips in a way I would have never imagined. I should have felt embarrassed. In fact, I thought I would be embarrassed. After all, the suit did little to disguise and much to emphasize my feminine shape. Instead, I felt... proud. Yes, that's it! I felt proud. I looked downright fantastic and I was actually proud of it.

I had made up my mind, I realized as I admired myself in the mirror. I was Wanda Hazleton, and Carrie was my daughter, and Paul was my husband—and my lover. Who knows? Maybe we could work at giving Carrie a little brother or sister.

So I enjoyed my day at the beach. Sunset Beach was actually an artificial beach built on a lake, but the late summer sun was warm and relaxing, and with the joyful cries of bathers splashing in the clear lake water, it took only a little imagination to pretend I was on a fashionable beach in a more exotic part of the world. I smiled at that, though. When, I thought about it, what could be more exotic than a town run by the gods?

"I see you're acclimating nicely," a voice said, bringing me out of my thoughts. I had been lying back against a plastic lounge, my eyes closed while Paul took the girls over for ice cream cones. When I opened my eyes, I saw Susan Jager looking down at me, a wide grin on her face. She was wearing a bikini similar to my own only in a burgundy shade that complemented her white skin and rich brown hair. "Nice outfit," she added.

I actually grinned back. "Yours, too."

"This is probably the last time I'll get to wear it," she laughed. "I'm pregnant, so by next spring I'll have to work to get back in shape to

wear it again.”

“Were you...” I began. “I mean, before Ovid, what...”

“You mean was I a woman before Ovid?” she asked brightly. “No, I wasn’t. I was an attorney but a male one—and a very unhappy one, too, I might add.”

“So... how did you become... pregnant?” It was a stupid question, but I asked it with a purpose. I had had sex with Paul. Was I pregnant? Was that the way it worked? I mean, sure, I thought about it for the future, but I wasn’t ready to have a child just yet.

“I became pregnant in the usual way,” she laughed. Then, she stopped laughing. “Oh, I can see by the look on your face what’s worrying you. Well, don’t worry. There’s a three-month grace period for all newcomers. You can’t get pregnant until then. But take my advice, if you’re already worrying about it, I assume you’re sexually active.” She gave me a wicked little grin. “And with a guy like Paul, I don’t blame you, by the way. So as to the advice: go ahead and get started on birth control pills. Better safe than sorry.”

“Sure,” I agreed. At least it was a relief to know I wasn’t pregnant—at least yet. “Susan, are you happy now?”

“The happiest.”

“I guess you realize this is all a big shock for me,” I ventured.

She nodded, sitting down on the lounge chair beside me. “Wanda, this is a big shock for everyone. Most of the men who are transformed into women didn’t really want that change. The same is true of the women who become men. But the funny thing is, it usually works out for the best. The Judge finds us because we’re usually about to experience a meaningless death out there in the real world. If I had died as I was supposed to out there, I would never have known how happy I could be. I was divorced, in bad health, and made a good living getting guilty slime balls off the hook in court. Now I’m young, married, proud of what I do for a living, and about to become a mother. Give it a chance. You can be happy, too.”

“I plan to,” I told her honestly.

We had to break off the conversation, for Paul, Carrie and Tanya had just come back with ice cream. Although I had said I didn’t want one, Paul had brought me back a huge strawberry cone, and it did look good. I accepted it gratefully, but I had a most unmasculine thought about needing to watch my weight.

By the time we got home that night, Carrie was practically asleep. When we had dropped Tanya off at her house, Carrie was barely awake enough for us to tell her goodnight. Of course, she had had a long day playing at the beach, followed by wolfing down a full-sized Rusty Burger. She was tired and full and made no arguments when I got her ready for bed.

It felt so natural to be doing that. Many were the times that I had gotten Trisha ready for bed, watching her with a smile as she ambled about half-asleep. Color aside, Carrie could have been Trisha. She had the same bright sparkle in her eyes and the same love of life. I kissed her gently as I tucked her in.

“I love you, Mommy,” she said sleepily.

I smiled and replied softly, “I love you, too Pumpkin.” And I found I really did.

“She asleep?” Paul asked when I got back into the den. He was standing there, still in his swim trunks as he flipped back and forth between the various satellite sports channels. His T-shirt covered his chest, but I couldn’t help but think he looked pretty fit.

“Sure is,” I replied. I was still in my bikini, too with just a cover-up over it. We had needed little else in the warm Oklahoma evening.

Paul turned to me and pulled my cover-up down. “You really do look hot in that bikini,” he remarked.

“I look hot out of this bikini, too,” I said with a sultry smile.

I knew where this was leading, but unlike the previous evening, I was ready for it, too. Sex as a woman had been better than I had imagined, and I found myself oddly attracted to this man. Maybe it was

the hormones, or maybe it was part of the magic of Ovid, but I didn't really care. I actually gave a little gasp of anticipation as Paul gently removed the bra of my suit. He wordlessly gave a gentle kiss to one of my nipples, and if he had asked, I would have made love to him right there in the den.

Fortunately, he didn't ask until nearly ten minutes later when I was lying back languidly on the bed.

It had been even better than the previous night, I reflected as I slipped out of bed the next morning. Oh, we hadn't done it as many times. We were tired, too. But I had been more relaxed. I had even worked up my nerve enough to experiment with oral sex. I was glad I had, too, for Paul reciprocated, proving to be a master at it.

How could I have considered giving this up? I thought as I showered. I had enjoyed life more in the last two days than in all the days as Jeff after Mary and Trisha had died. I was part of a family again. Granted, I wasn't crazy about my job, but I had a lot to be grateful for. I had a decent lifestyle, a loving spouse, a pretty young daughter, and most of all, I had a future. Where was my life as Jeff leading me? I hadn't really dated since Mary's death and had no plans to start. I had sacrificed my career with the police for revenge, and although I could have done nothing else, the sweetness of the revenge had turned to bitter ash in Jeff's mouth.

I found I was even starting to think of Jeff as another person. He was someone I had known a long time ago. He was a nice guy, but he had problems—problems I couldn't help him with. Jeff was gone. He wasn't even dead and buried; he had never existed.

The only unresolved thing in my mind was what to do about my assignment. Remaining as Wanda was a personal choice I had already made. But that didn't mean I couldn't complete my assignment. I could simply ask Erin to leave me as I was. The problem was that I still needed to figure out who the good guys were.

There were really three possibilities, I realized as I dressed for the day in a white casual knit top and denim cut-offs. The first possibility was

that Erin had been telling me the truth. It was the simplest solution, really. It meant all I had to do was call the number, tell her where Peter Allison was, and go on with my life.

But what if the Judge and his crew were the good guys? What if they didn't seek to rule mankind, but that Erin and her cohorts did? Would the combined force of the classical gods and goddesses be stuck here in a small Oklahoma town if that was their ultimate goal? I had seen power wielded that I could have never imagined a few days ago. If they sought to rule with that power, why weren't they in Washington doing to Congress what they had done to Ovid?

There was a third possibility as well. It was just possible that there weren't any good guys or bad guys. How did the old song go? *There ain't no good guys; there ain't no bad guys. There's just you and me and we just disagree.* Maybe that song described the gods.

So should I call or not? The dilemma plagued me throughout most of the day. Of course, that meant I didn't call. I just enjoyed life right up until the moment it all fell apart.

Oh, it started innocently enough. Carrie had gone over to play with some neighborhood kids. I was even relieved to see they were both black and white kids. While Ovid seemed to have its bigots, the races in general mixed well. Paul was on the patio in back of the house, poring over some materials for a class he would be teaching for the fall term. I was going through the motions of doing what all working wives and mothers do on the weekends—laundry, cleaning, and all the other domestic chores. It was time for a break, so I fixed a pitcher of lemonade for Paul and me.

"Thanks, babe," he said with a smile as he accepted the icy glass. He took a sip and added, "I needed that."

"What's the class?" I asked, sitting next to him and nodding at the stack of books he had spread around him on the table.

"Comparative religion," he told me. When he saw my vague look, he explained, "You know, comparing the various religious beliefs around the world, like Loki to the Trickster or Wotan to Jupiter."

Jupiter. The name caught me by surprise. "I thought we couldn't say their names here," I commented. It was an idle comment. I hadn't really thought about the fact that Paul wouldn't know what I was talking about. I wondered how I would explain my comment.

But he was too wrapped up in his subject to notice. "We can, so long as it's in the mythological context instead of..." He broke off, and his dark face actually lost a little color as he realized what he had just said. I realized it at the same moment: he knew!

"Wanda, let me explain..." he began nervously.

"You know who you are!" I practically yelled. "You... you..." I wanted to say "took advantage of me", but it sounded so shop-worn. Some detective I was! Paul had fooled me into believing he was just one of the innocent souls transformed without memory of a previous life. "My god, how you must be laughing at me," I muttered through gritted teeth. "Was it fun, fooling the big city detective? Who are you, Paul? Are you one of them? One of Jup... Jup... the Judge's people? Or are you one of Erin's people just making sure I complete my assignment."

"Damn it, Wanda," Paul broke in, "will you let up for a minute? I'll tell you everything if you just give me a chance."

"A chance?" I yelled. "A chance? I gave you a chance. I thought you were... I mean, I even let you... screw me! You son of a bitch! You..."

"Wanda! Please listen to me! I'm Peter Allison!"

It was probably the one thing he could say that would make me shut up. "You're who?" I asked softly.

"Peter Allison," he repeated. "I'm the one you're looking for."

It didn't make any sense. I had already found Peter Allison, hadn't I? And besides, Paul wasn't even on the list.

"I'm Peter Allison," Paul said again. "Look, sit back down. I've got a story to tell you."

It was a hell of a story. I sat quietly, listening as Paul told me his story. Part of it I knew already, but I knew it out of context. Paul as Peter

was really human like me and he really had been a fund manager. What I hadn't known was that his undergraduate degree had been in sociology. Rather than go on in that field, he had shifted to business, eventually ending up with the Harvard MBA. By the time he was forty, he had been married, divorced, and had become one of the most successful fund managers ever to work for Janus.

"I think I picked Janus because of the mythological symbolism. Classical mythology was always a hobby of mine," he explained with a little smile. When he saw my confusion, he explained, "Janus was one of the oldest of the Roman gods. He supposedly ruled areas around Rome and even invented money."

"I wonder if he really exists," I murmured, more to myself than to Paul.

"Probably," Paul replied. "Anyhow, I had my obligatory mid-life crisis. I had done everything I set out to accomplish at Janus, and I was bored. Then a woman named Erin contacted me about a job with a group of private investors. They had set aside a fairly modest fund—only five million—and wanted someone who could make it grow for them."

"Wasn't five million a little puny after what you had to play with at Janus," I asked a little sarcastically.

"It was," he agreed, "but that was the challenge. Look, Wanda, they told me about you. I know who you used to be. When you were in Homicide, did you ever get tired of the slam-dunk cases and find a tough one you really wanted to sink your teeth into?"

"Sure," I admitted. I was getting over being mad in spite of the fact that the Judge's side had obviously set me up, too. Paul may have been Peter Allison at one time, but like me, he was now a different person. I don't know if I would have liked Peter Allison, but in spite of all that had happened, I found I still liked Paul. He was as much of a cat's-paw as I was.

"That's how I felt about the private fund," he continued. "It was a challenge. It's easy to run a fifty million dollar fund. You're the eight hundred pound gorilla—you sit wherever you want. That's not the way

it is when you have a small fund.”

I was finding it difficult to think of five million dollars as a small amount of money, but I saw his point. And as I knew from personal experience, Erin could be quite persuasive. I could see Paul—Peter then—being enticed by the thought of building up a fund from scratch. It must have been a terrific challenge for him. I told him so.

“Not really,” he said shaking his head with a little smile. “It took me less than a year to build it up to thirty million.”

“And then you decided to take it all for yourself,” I surmised a little sadly. He was Paul now, but he had embezzled thirty million. There was some real irony here. I was a former cop who had fallen for a crook.

“Wrong. I don’t have a dime of the money.”

He smiled at my open-mouthed stare.

“They were careless,” he explained. “They didn’t know about my interest in mythology. I would overhear names and events. Eventually, I started to put them together. It was by eavesdropping that I learned of something of their plans. And what I heard frightened me. Wanda, the funny thing is, these Others think they’re doing the right thing, but they aren’t. They’re so frightened of the Judge and his plans that they’re willing to form an alliance with a group they call the Old Ones. I don’t know who they are, but I can guess. The results wouldn’t be pretty, I’m afraid.”

I didn’t tell him that I knew where the Old Ones were. He seemed concerned enough about them without knowing that there was a direct conduit to them only a few blocks away.

“Then I heard them mention Ovid,” he went on. “I was desperate. I was working for beings who could bring about the downfall—even the end—of mankind. And I was giving them the money to carry out their plans. Then, I overheard them mention Ovid by name.”

“So you came here on your own with the money,” I surmised, too wrapped up in his story to sustain my anger. This was Paul, I kept

telling myself—not Peter Allison. This was Paul, the man I... I...

He nodded. “Yes, but more importantly, I had my notes about their activities.”

“So tell me,” I prompted. “What makes you think the Judge and his ilk are the good guys?”

He actually laughed at that. “It really isn’t that simple. I can’t say too much without running into the blocks the Judge has on all of us. Personally though, I have more faith in the Judge than I do in the Others.”

“So you brought the money here?”

He shook his head. “The money is still invested. It’s in timed accounts. I’m sure they told you that before they sent you here. Losing the money hurts their cause, but what they really want to know is what I discovered from them and what I told the Judge. That information is potentially far more damaging to them than losing the money.”

It all made sense, except for one thing: why had the Judge changed me into the wife of the very man I sought? It didn’t make any sense unless...

“My god, Paul!”

His look of contrition turned to one of alarm. “What?”

“Do you know what a cat’s-paw is?”

He grinned. “Sure, I like mythology, remember? It refers to an old legend where a monkey uses the paw of a cat to get chestnuts out of a fire. It means a tool.”

“And that’s what we both are,” I told him quickly. “We’re in danger here.”

“Not if you cooperate,” a new voice said. But it was a familiar voice.

“Hello, Erin,” I said without turning.

It was, indeed, Erin, flanked by two large men. I had seen their type many times before. They were hired muscle. Ask them to add two plus

two and they'd look at you in confusion, but ask them to break somebody's arm and they would respond at once.

"Hello, Wanda," Erin responded. "You've done a fine job for us. You are to be congratulated."

For what? I wondered. I had fingered the wrong person as being Allison. Then, I had gotten so comfortable in my new life that I hadn't called in. And all along, my target was sharing a bed with me. Well, what was the old saying? Something about keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I couldn't have gotten much closer to Paul.

"But how did you know about...?" I closed my eyes and sighed.

"You've had me bugged, haven't you?"

She smiled and reached into my purse which I had carelessly left on the couch. She extracted the card she had given me at day care a couple of days earlier.

"It's magical?" I asked.

"No," she laughed. "As I told you before, it's a little dangerous to use magic around here. It's state-of-the-art electronics. We have a listening post a few miles out of Ovid."

"But you didn't come when I thought I had found Peter yesterday," I pointed out.

Erin shook her head as she put the card in a pocket in her skirt. "No, it just didn't sound right. We decided to wait. It seemed unlikely that Peter would have been given such a life after he did so much to hurt our cause. And we were right. Here he is with a loving family and a prestigious job at the college. See how they use people, Wanda? You, his hunter, became a significant part of his reward."

I flushed in both anger and embarrassment. I had been used, true, but I had found something I thought I had lost in the process. But Erin didn't know that, did she?

"Now," Erin continued, "if the two of you will come with us, we can settle this whole affair like civilized people."

Now what did that mean? Was I to be returned to my old life? What would happen to Paul? What would happen to the human race?

“Come on, Wanda,” she prompted. “No harm will come to you. We will make good our promise to you. You will be Jeff Riley on a plane home to Chicago by morning.”

“But what about... Paul?” I couldn’t bring myself to call him Peter.

“He has betrayed us and caused great trouble for our cause,” she explained. “His fate doesn’t concern you. You shouldn’t care, you know. He deceived you. He took advantage of your womanhood.”

Paul looked at me sadly. “For what it’s worth, Wanda, I do love you.”

I said nothing. I didn’t want Erin to know that I had made my decision, and I wanted to remain Wanda—with Paul at my side.

“Wait!” I told Erin. She turned to face me, puzzled. “What about Officer Mercer? What if the Judge knows you’re here?”

“He can’t possibly know,” she laughed. “And Officer Mercer is quite occupied right now. A bus filled with children on their way to a Sunday School day camp is about to roll off the road and catch fire not ten miles from Ovid. He will be occupied with that for the rest of the day. So will the Judge I should imagine.”

Was that what the Others were all about? Would they actually risk the lives of a bus loaded with children to further their cause? If I had held any doubts before, they were gone now. I had picked the right side.

“Oh?”

Another familiar voice, but this was one I was happy to hear. It was Officer Mercer. I wondered in a sudden flash of cockeyed humor if I had made enough lemonade for everyone.

I should have been paying more attention. As the two heavies tried to take on Officer Mercer, Erin grabbed Paul and began to fade from view. I should have realized she didn’t plan to get him out of Ovid by conventional means.

“No!” I screamed, grabbing Paul’s fading form by the legs in what had

to be a tackle my old high school football coach would have been proud of. Of course, I learned in that moment that wrapping your arms around a man's lower torso when you had breasts the size of mine was a little painful, but I held on. I felt Erin's grasp on Paul fail and I tumbled to the ground with him as she faded from view. I hit my head on the patio bricks and was out like a light.

"She'll be all right."

The voice seemed to be echoing around inside my head, pushing back the darkness as I awoke. I couldn't tell how much time had passed. All I knew was that I had the mother of all headaches.

"It was just a mild concussion," the voice, which I now realized was Officer Mercer, explained.

"Easily repaired," another voice, belonging to the Judge I realized, said.

The pain in my head and the bruises I incurred in my unladylike tackle faded to nothingness. I opened my eyes and sat up. Of the five men looking at me, only Paul looked concerned. Both Officer Mercer and the Judge were smiling confidently, and the two heavies stood against a wall with sullen but frightened looks on their faces. They seemed unable to move. Looking around, I realized I was in my own—or Wanda's own—living room.

"What happened?" I managed to say.

"Quite a lot, really," the Judge said with a slight chuckle. "Officer Mercer subdued our two friends over there while you kept Paul here from being captured by Eris."

"Eris?" I echoed.

The Judge nodded. "You apparently knew her as Erin. She's quite a dangerous character. She's considered to be essentially the very personification of strife. She and her brother Mars used to cut quite a swathe before he settled down to become a pillar of our little community."

I looked at Paul. "Are you all right?" I asked quietly.

"I'm fine, babe," he assured me, taking my hand in his and squeezing lightly. "You saved my life."

"She saved a lot more than that," the Judge told us. "Thanks to your husband, Wanda, we have severely damaged the network of the Others. We were able to uncover their plans to release the Old Ones and upset the careful balance of power we have maintained for centuries on end. Had they realized how much we now know of their plans, they might have been able to adapt more quickly. Thanks to you, though, we will be able to act on Paul's information within the next few days. We are in your debt."

"Thanks, I think," I said, still a little woozy.

"Now, to business," the Judge said. He muttered a few words in that archaic dialect of Latin, or whatever it was, and I watched in rapt fascination as the two heavies shrank, their clothes becoming a coating of fur. In moments, two small Pekinese dogs growled nervously as they brushed against each other. "Meet Yin and Yang," the Judge laughed. "They'll be going to a good home. As soon as Yin goes into heat, they'll be too busy to get into any more mischief."

Then the Judge turned to me. "You should feel privileged, Wanda. Very seldom have I given anyone the opportunity to change back, but since you were brought to us under false pretences and have helped us with a very knotty problem, it is only right that you be rewarded. I'm prepared to return you to your old life."

I gasped. If he had offered this to me two days earlier, I would have accepted in a fraction of a heartbeat. Now, though, I wasn't prepared to be Jeff Riley ever again. Paul had lied to me, but the stakes had been higher than I had imagined. I looked at him. There were tears in his eyes.

"Paul, I..."

"You do whatever you want, babe," he said sadly.

"Do you... do you really love me?"

His eyes squeezed in pain. "Oh yes I do. When they brought you to

me, I never dreamed I'd end up loving you, but I do."

If you love something, set it free. I don't remember where I read it, but I know I did. Paul loved me enough to let me go back to my old life. But I couldn't do that. I was Wanda Hazleton. And just thinking about that made me want to be with him. Without a word, I stepped into his arms. I hugged him as if I never wanted to let him go, and felt the loving pressure of his arms around me.

"Well, Officer Mercer," the Judge said with a polite cough, "it seems we have a new resident in Ovid."

Then I had an idea. "Judge, what happened to the school bus?"

"We were fortunate," the Judge replied. "We had other associates who were watching for such a strategy. The children are fine. They won't be joining us."

"But even with that, Officer Mercer couldn't have prevented Paul from being kidnapped."

"That's true, my dear," the Judge admitted.

"If Ovid is growing, maybe it's about time to expand the police force," I ventured. "And I don't think Mr. Hanes has been too happy with my work."

The Judge smiled. "My esteemed brother is seldom happy with anything. Continue, my dear..."

...and I was suddenly back in my office with Diana and Susan.

"You stopped too soon!" Diana cried.

"But you know where she is now," I told her, "don't you?"

"I don't," Susan said.

"But of course I do," Diana replied with a wave of her hand. "I just like happy endings. You know, the kind where everything gets all tied up in a big bow."

"Well, I don't know about the bow, but I do know how to tie things up. I

need to drop off some papers for the Judge before we go to lunch. Shall we?" I asked, rising to my feet.

Of course, only Susan didn't know, but I imagine she suspected. All of her clients had been brought directly to court that week, so she hadn't been on the Police Department side of the building since it happened. Her mouth still dropped open when she saw what Diana and I already knew. There, behind the front desk at the Police Department was a new officer. Although dressed like Officer Mercer, the officer wore a uniform that had obviously been tailored for a much more curvaceous form.

"Hi, Cindy," the lovely black woman said from her desk, a wide smile on her face.

"Hi, Wanda," I replied with a smile of my own. "How's the new job working out?"

"Great," she told us. Then she looked at Diana whom she had never seen before.

"It's all right," I told Wanda. "You can talk in front of Diana. In fact, you can say anything you like."

Wanda gave Diana the quick once-over as only a police officer can.

"One of them, eh?" she asked. There was no rancor in her voice. She actually seemed to find Diana's godhood amusing.

Diana just smiled.

"It's good to be back in police work again," Wanda told us. "Even if it is behind a desk. I don't know how Officer Mercer held everything together, even with his speed."

"Is everything okay with you and Paul?" Susan asked.

Wanda raised an eyebrow. "Looking for a little divorce work, counsellor?"

"Of course not!" Susan replied, her face reddening.

Wanda just laughed. "Only joking, Susan. But to answer your question, Paul was in the doghouse for a couple of days. It's funny,

but I find I enjoy getting flowers and gifts from a repentant spouse. Like the new earrings?" She indicated the small glittering stones in her ear lobes. "They were yesterday's peace offering."

"Rubies," Diana observed. "They're very nice. Next time, though, be a real woman—hold out for diamonds."

Wanda, Susan and I all laughed, but I think I was the only one who realized Diana hadn't really been joking! Diana looked confused at first, but then she smiled, too.

"There's just one thing I'd like to know," Susan said as the three of us walked to the Greenhouse. "If Peter wasn't Lisa James, then who was she?"

"Be derved if I know," Diana said with a deadpan drawl that matched Lisa's perfectly. She then smiled at us. "We all have to do our part for the cause, you know."

I couldn't stop laughing at the look of surprise on Susan's face.

Ovid X: The Academician

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Even when I was male, I always looked forward to spring. I enjoyed watching as the days got longer and the air got warmer. Just watching signs of life returning to the trees and grass was enough to raise my spirits to the stars. As spring began this year, I had something else to look forward to that I would have never imagined when I was male: I would deliver my first baby.

Well, as far as the doctor was concerned, it wasn't my first. He remembered delivering my twins a few years before. But of course, I knew that I had never delivered them. They had been transformed into my children just as I had been transformed into their mother. That created something of a problem. The doctors and nurses all gave me the 'you've been through all this before' brush-off when I started looking a little nervous about the whole process. I couldn't very well tell them that I hadn't really given birth before, because like most people in Ovid, they had no idea that their entire existence was nothing more than a construct of the gods.

So there I was, as big as a house, waddling uncomfortably from place to place and trying not to be terrified by the whole process of giving birth. It had been so strange at first. Like most men who had never been exposed to the whole process before, I assumed that it was a little simpler than it really was. I didn't realize the radical changes my own body would make to accommodate the baby. In some ways, it was as eerie as my magical transformation from a young man into a woman.

I began to feel the first stirrings of life within me after only three months. It wasn't kicking exactly but it was something close to it. I could sense the presence of a life there that was not my own. Then I got to watch in fascination as my belly began to expand. It was thrilling at first; now it was just uncomfortable.

Seven months into the whole process, I began to feel that surely I couldn't get any bigger and surely the baby had to come any day now. No such luck. My body continued to swell up until I thought my skin couldn't stretch any more, and now my breasts were larger as well, even secreting a tiny bit of fluid occasionally. I began to sympathize with cows who needed to be milked.

If it hadn't been for Susan, I think I would have blown a fuse. Susan Jager was every bit as pregnant as I was, but the doctors treated her differently. As far as anyone in Ovid was concerned, this would be her first baby. They explained everything to her. They held her hand. They calmed her fears—fears which were every bit as great as my own. Since Susan was a former man too, I think I have enough anecdotal evidence to say that this whole pregnancy thing was made tougher for us because we had not grown up with the idea that we would have to deliver children.

When I was first transformed into a woman, I found it odd but not unpleasant. I managed to adapt to my new role fairly quickly, as most new residents of Ovid do. I'm convinced it's all part of the magic. In fact, after a few weeks, it became difficult to imagine being anyone but Cindy Patton. I had been given a pretty good life. I was attractive and I had a loving husband and two wonderful kids. Oh, the sex took a little getting used to, but by now I wouldn't have it any other way. I pity men who will never know the exhilaration of multiple orgasms. Add to all that the fact that my job was probably one of the most interesting in town—administrative assistant for the Judge—and I would have to admit I had the ideal life.

The only problem is that I got pregnant. There was nothing miraculous about that—if I discounted my initial transformation. My husband Jerry and I just decided it would be a good idea to have another child. Since we had twins, they would grow up and leave us at the same time. Why not have another one? We were young enough. And it seemed like a good idea at the time.

I guess natural girls just grow up with the idea that they'll give birth. For me though, it was a whole new concept. To be honest, I don't

think I was handling it terribly well. Nobody knew about the little calendar I kept in my desk with a big red circle around my expected due date. It was getting close now, and I could hardly wait.

I felt an odd little surge between my legs and an uncomfortable kick. What would it be like, to spread my legs wide and feel intense but welcome pain as a new person forced its way out of my body? Did natural women really take it in stride? I supposed that they did. I would do my best too, but for the first time in a long time, I found myself regretting my new sex.

I waddled over to a filing cabinet to file some mundane cases that had been handled that morning. As I opened the file drawer, the files I had propped on top of the cabinet fell to the floor. Of course they spread out all over the floor. Why couldn't they at least have fallen in one place?

"Oh great!" I grumbled, wondering how I was going to pick them up in my condition. Then I heard the door open behind me. A visitor! I was so pleased. It meant I would have someone to pick up the files for me.

"Just in time!" I said happily, turning to see my friend Susan, looking equally pregnant and unable to pick up the files for me. "Oh no."

She smiled wickedly, "And I'm happy to see you, too."

I had forgotten our lunch date. Saddled with the extra weight of the baby, I was way behind in my work. Thank god the Judge had left for wherever he went in his off time after court. At least I would have the afternoon to try to catch up.

"I'm sorry," I told Susan, giving her a little hug. A little hug was all I could manage given our respective sizes. "I just dropped these files and I don't know if I can get them."

"I'll get them," a cheerful disembodied voice called out. With a pop of air, a well-dressed Oriental girl in perhaps her early twenties was suddenly standing in front of us.

"Diana!" Susan and I said together.

She shook her head, waist length black hair swirling about. "Today, I am Di Lee."

"I don't think I've ever heard a Chinese name of Di," I pointed out.

She shrugged. "Well, it sounds sort of Chinese, doesn't it?"

She had me there.

"I thought I'd buy lunch for the two of you today," she told us as she inspected our highly pregnant bodies.

"We'll gladly accept," I replied. "But I'm a little surprised to see you."

Her dark eyes widened, looking even more Oriental in the process.

"Why is that?"

"Well, there really haven't been any terribly exciting cases in Ovid for a while." It was true. Things had been somewhat slow since the flap with the Old Ones in the fall. The few new transformees we had run through the court at the end of the year were just the run of the mill types. There hadn't been a case of interest to Diana and the rest of the gods for some time. In fact, I hadn't even seen Diana for months except for a short visit around the holidays.

"There's one that interests me, though," she said with a little smile.

I thought I could guess which one it was. "You want to see the hooker who became a little boy, right?"

"Yuck! Certainly not."

"Then how about the gambler who became a junior high cheerleader?"

"Bor-ring."

I was getting frustrated. "The state patrol officer who became a secretary?"

"Wrong again."

I threw up my hands. "I give up then. Who do you want to see?"

She grinned. "I'll tell you at lunch."

“Wait,” I called as she turned to lead us out of the office. “What about the files on the floor?”

She looked at me, her eyelashes fluttering innocently. “What files?”

There were, of course, no spilled files on the floor.

It took longer than usual to walk over to The Greenhouse for lunch. Susan and I looked more like penguins than women as we waddled through the early spring day to our favorite restaurant. When we were settled at a fairly private table with Diet Cokes in hand, I asked Diana, “Okay who is it you want to see?”

“The archaeologist.”

I frowned. “That surprises me. What’s unusual about that case?” I hadn’t even reviewed that one myself, and for some reason, none of the gods had expressed any interest in it. Come to think of it, I realized, that by itself was a little suspicious.

“Nothing really,” she said coyly.

I could see I wasn’t going to get anything else out of her. Whatever it was though would become evident once we had viewed his story. The sooner we started, the sooner I would know what it was all about.

“Okay,” I sighed, feeling myself slipping into the trance that would begin the story. “Here we go...”

I could think of more pleasant places to be than the American Midwest in the winter. In fact, I couldn’t think of many more unpleasant places. I had left Columbia, Missouri that morning just ahead of a storm that promised to dump several inches of snow by nightfall. The edge of the storm, lumbering down along the I-70 corridor that bisected Missouri, gave me the incentive I needed to eschew that route in favor of a more serpentine but safer southern route. If only I could overcome my severe distaste for flying, I thought, as the first snowflakes of the day scudded along my windshield.

If I had both the money and the willpower to board another plane, I would gladly return to the Eastern Mediterranean where I had just

spent the happiest months of my life. My time there in the soft, warm sea breezes had thinned my blood. Even with the car heater on at maximum, I found myself shivering as I watched the bleak winter landscape of Oklahoma rush by.

Bleak. Now there was a word that had many uses. It could describe the perennial assault of winter, and it could easily describe the reception that awaited me when I got back to UCLA where I held the title of Professor of Archaeology. I had planned on returning in triumph as my sabbatical year ended, but the events of the last few days had dashed those plans. It is said that man plans and the gods laugh. Truer words were never spoken.

Like many of my academic stature, I believed that while the university life I had chosen was nearly ideal, there were drawbacks. With the budget cuts in so many academic fields, more and more pressure was put upon us to be in the classroom. As a young graduate assistant, I took my turn in the classroom, toiling in front of lesser minds than my own, trying to teach them at least the fundamentals of a subject that should have been considered mankind's very birthright. Yet most students found the subject tedious.

At least I was actually thought by many to be a talented instructor, and I suppose I must admit I did derive some initial enjoyment from the experience. Be that as it may, I had my sights set on greater things. I admired my professors. They were men of high standing, always leading expeditions into the field, publishing books, and presenting papers. But teaching? Of course not. They were above such things. I aspired to be just like them, and who more deserving than I? For after all, I had a mission. My mission was to reach the veritable top of my field—to be responsible for discoveries too great to be ignored by even the dullest of minds.

It took me all of my youth, but I persevered. At last, I rose to the exalted rank of Professor of Archaeology at UCLA. I was halfway to my goal. The other half would be more difficult, for I had determined what my great discovery would be.

When I was a boy of only twelve, an aunt of mine gave me a

Christmas present that was to have great influence on my life. It was a book on Greek and Roman mythology. The title of the book is not important—in fact, it was so elementary I am embarrassed to admit that I read it even at the tender age of twelve. But the book did fire my imagination. I began to read everything I could on the subject. Within weeks, I had devoured every book our local library had on the subject, and I was crying for more.

Fortunately, my parents indulged me. I was, after all, the youngest of my siblings. In fact, my next youngest brother was six years older than I and was just starting college, so in many ways, it was as if I was an only child. Both of my parents were well educated. My father had taught high school chemistry until the lure of higher wages in the corporate sector pulled him away. Mother had taught as well once at the elementary level, but had given it up when my father's income allowed her to stay at home and raise my siblings and me.

That combination of education and indulgence spurred them to take me the short distance from our home in Indianapolis to Bloomington, Indiana, the home of the University of Indiana. That school has one of the finest programs in mythology and folklore in the world. To say that its collection on the subject is phenomenal would be an understatement. I gasped when I saw the stacks, with shelf after shelf of obscure out-of-print books on every mythological subject imaginable. I was in love.

Yes, the love of my life was learning, and there was little room for other forms of love as a result. My parents died while I was still in graduate school. Busy on a dig in Crete, I could only shrug at their deaths in a plane crash and continue my work. I hadn't bothered to join my brother and sister at the funeral. Perhaps that was the beginning of my distancing myself from the rest of my family.

Married life proved equally unrewarding. I had married a fellow doctoral candidate at Harvard. We seemed well suited, but we soon found it was not to be. My commitment to my field was far more serious than hers, and we parted if not friends, at least as respected colleagues.

After obtaining my doctorate at Harvard, my career advanced quickly. At the age of twenty-four, my doctoral dissertation had caused quite a stir. I advanced a theory relating to a secret cabal which dominated Greek politics for decades before the Roman invasions. Fortunately for my career, I was able to defend my thesis, even parlaying it into a funded trip to Greece where I was able to prove substantial parts of my theory.

That landed me two things: first, an Associate Professorship at UCLA and second, an invitation to become a Fellow of the American Archeological Society. From then on, I never looked back.

Unfortunately, midway through my forties, I seemed to have reached a dead end. I was a full professor now with half a dozen learned books in print. The name Thomas W. Winslow was known throughout academia. The problem was that I was chained to a classroom.

I was, I suppose, a victim of the times. Once, universities were seats of learning from which scholars gleaned whatever details they saw fit. If youths came to them to be enlightened, it was up to the scholars to impart whatever they deemed important to these neophytes. Not now, though. Universities are institutions of the state. Even if private, universities must beg for every crumb from politicians and bureaucrats whose intellect is mediocre at best. We are all slaves to political correctness and the whims of the masses. Money is tight. What this meant to scholars like me is that the new goal of universities was to fill young heads with mush and push them out into the world with a degree in hand which proved their intellectual accomplishments no better than the degree the Wizard of Oz gave to the Tin Man. In short, it was my fate in life to spend so much time in the classroom that there was little time for research.

I remembered my own undergraduate days back in Indiana. The classrooms were then manned by instructors or assistant professors—unimportant men whose limitations condemned them to lesser roles than the research undertaken by full professors. Their worn tweed coats and their rheumy eyes spoke volumes about their lives. Was I to be condemned to a similar fate in spite of my apparent status?

But I still had hope. I had developed a theory about the very nature of the Roman gods which I was sure I could prove with proper financial backing. It was just a little over a year ago that my Department Chairman, Raymond Jensen delivered the good news.

“Congratulations, Tom,” he said, smiling as he laid the grant file on my desk. Ray was a decent sort. Of course, as the Department Chair, he was more politician than scholar, but at least he seemed to be genuinely interested in advancing the needs of his staff. “It’s everything you asked for.”

My grant proposal had been made to so many funding agencies that I had lost count. Excited, I opened the file. There it was—a grant large enough for me to travel the Eastern Mediterranean for a full year with a small staff. Then I noticed the name of the funding organization: “The Olympus Foundation?”

Ray sat down in front of my desk, chuckling, “Appropriate name, don’t you think?”

“I suppose it is,” I admitted. “Who are they?”

“They work with a couple of other major funds. It’s there in the grant. Apparently they have a charter to ‘advance the cause of civilization’, or some such nonsense. God only knows where some of these groups come up with their goals and objectives. This is a first for them, though. They’ll be funding all of this grant—not just a part of it as they usually do.”

I scanned the document. The Olympus Foundation had an impressive board. Although not always politically astute, I knew enough to recognize several of the names as leading political figures and...

“There’s an admiral on this list of directors—an Admiral Nepper,” I pointed out.

Ray shrugged. “So?”

“What interest does the military have in something like this? Is this some undercover operation?”

“What do you mean?”

I sighed, shaking my head. "Ray, I'll be travelling all over the Eastern Med. That includes Israel and maybe Lebanon and Syria. I suppose they want to have someone come along to represent the Foundation, eh? Maybe that someone will be CIA."

Ray looked at me quizzically. "Aren't you being a little paranoid? Read the grant. There's no requirement for one of their people to tag along. This is your show, Tom. This is a big coup for you and the University. Don't blow it."

I didn't blow it. I felt like Indiana Jones as I put together the expedition and girded my loins for the inevitable plane ride to the Med. The year had proven to be the greatest year of my life, and what I had found, I had managed to keep secret from even my own small staff. My theory had been entirely correct. Of course, I had couched my theory in more acceptable terms that would appeal to funding sources. As far as my staff and the Olympus Foundation was concerned, I had set out to prove the influences of Graeco-Roman theology on the early settlements and colonies in the Eastern Mediterranean. Actually, I had set out to prove much more—and I had succeeded.

Now, though, I was back. My year's sabbatical was at an end. Several more weeks of meticulously compiling my results awaited me, but I had been given a full class load as well that I would be expected to handle. I was returning to Hell with only scraps of time to put my findings together. And what I had found—if believed—would shake the very foundations of Western civilization.

And to my dismay, the University had scheduled a series of lectures for my return as well, to be delivered at several major universities under the auspices of the American Archaeological Society. I had tried to beg off, but the Olympus Foundation also insisted. Their grant had been generous, and if I ever wanted to apply to them again, I would not want to anger them. The piper did indeed call the tune. It was at one of these lectures just days ago at the University of Missouri in Columbia that my triumph began to unravel.

I was careful in my lecture to keep my most important findings hidden from the audience. One of the more Machiavellian aspects of

academia is the propensity of scholars to snipe at each other's findings. To prevent this, it is often necessary to hold back information until results are reported in a formal paper. This was my plan, so I was careful to speak in only the most general terms. I was determined to surrender only small fragments of what I had learned, and none of those fragments would alert anyone to the more important elements of my discoveries.

I had not known that the University of Missouri has one of the top journalism schools in the country. Therefore, it is not uncommon for the media elite to send their own children there. It was one of those children—a journalism major no doubt—who asked the question which proved to be my undoing.

"Doctor Winslow," the pretty young blonde asked from her seat in the middle of the crowd, "you almost sound as if you believe the old Roman and Greek gods exist. Are they... say aliens or something?"

I took the question as one made in jest and answered it in a similar fashion. "I suppose anything is possible," I said with a smile which was calculated to let the audience know that I knew something they did not.

I thought nothing more about the incident, busying myself with backtracking to St Louis for a speech at Washington University there. Imagine my surprise when I returned from that speech to find that Ray Jensen had left an urgent message for me.

"Tom, are you out of your mind?" Those were his first words to me, taking me aback.

"What are you talking about, Ray?" I had never heard him so agitated.

"Then you don't know? You haven't seen the papers today?"

A complimentary copy of the St Louis Post Dispatch was on my bed, unread. As Ray ranted in my ear, I picked up the paper. The article I knew he was referring to wasn't hard to find. It actually made the front section:

NOTED PROFESSOR CLAIMS GREEK GODS CAME FROM

SPACE

I spotted my name at once. Oh my god, I realized. It was a story from a wire service. That meant the story was all over the world.

“Ray, this isn’t true,” I said indignantly. I went on to explain what had actually been said.

“Tom,” Ray began through obviously gritted teeth, “that little blonde who asked the question is the daughter of Morton McKee.”

My blood froze. Everyone knew who Morton McKee was. He had parlayed a supermarket rag into a nationwide newspaper which was challenging USA Today. In spite of its tabloid style, *The National Dispatch* had gained nationwide attention, and McKee now ruled an empire which included newspapers, magazines, and even cable channels and god only knew what else.

Undoubtedly, my young blonde protagonist had been asking the question to get precisely the sort of response I had given her. I cursed myself for being so naïve. It was nothing but a coy little bit of repartee and yet it might do untold damage to my career.

“We have to refute the article,” I told Ray.

“What do you think we’re already doing?” Ray returned. “I’ve already gotten calls from the Chancellor and two of the Regents. And then there’s all the newspapers and broadcasting stations. We even got a call from *Good Morning America*. We’ve told them all you were quoted out of context. But Tom, you’ve been badly damaged by this.”

He was right. Any results I published would be overshadowed by this exaggerated example of yellow journalism. And as far as my confidential findings... well, no one would believe me now, even if I offered them proof. Unless something drastic was done, I would be remembered forever as the man who said the gods were from outer space.

“I’ll cut short my tour,” I offered. I hadn’t really wanted the speaking tour anyhow. It had been forced on me by the Olympus Foundation. They would surely understand that correcting this misconception was

of paramount importance.

“That’s a good idea, Tom.”

So there I was, glumly crossing the Midwest on my way back to California. I was being forced to drive to my own execution—or so I felt. Oh, I knew what would happen. I would be allowed to publish my findings, but only after a committee of my peers, appointed by the Chancellor, had gone over it with the proverbial fine-toothed comb. What would be left would be a paper that was dull at best and so pedestrian that it would never justify the grant money spent to generate it. I would be for all practical purposes disgraced, hidden away in a classroom teaching ‘Beginning Archaeology’ to a class that didn’t want to be there any more than I did.

To add to my misery, the snow was becoming heavier, mixed with a cold rain that was freezing quickly to the pavement. I wasn’t used to that sort of weather. Sure, I had grown up in Indiana, but my years in California had thinned my blood and weakened my winter driving senses. I had forgotten how treacherous icy roads could be.

By concentrating, I was able to stay on the road, but I had to reduce my speed to the point that several cars with local license plates pulled around me at what I could only consider rash speeds. When the latest of these speeders roared around me, fishtailing ever so slightly on the slick road, I was relieved. There was no more traffic around.

My relief was ill founded. Inching around a blind curve, I was suddenly startled by the presence of a large delivery truck. Apparently, the driver was having problems of his own controlling his vehicle, and he had crossed the yellow centerline ever so slightly. The sudden presence of the truck so close to my own vehicle caused me to swerve toward the shoulder. Impulsively, I jerked the wheel back the other way. It was the wrong thing to do. In a heartbeat, my car had jumped off the road, heading for a small stand of trees. I closed my eyes, bracing for impact.

It never came. I opened my eyes slowly. There, to my left and behind me, was the stand of trees. At the last moment, my car had swerved a

little to the right, narrowly missing the trees which would have most likely ended my life. I sighed in relief. I would live.

Yes, I would live. I would live to face my disgrace. Perhaps it would have been better, I thought to myself, if I had hit the trees. No, I realized. That would do no good. Had I hit them and been killed, my obituary would have talked about my supposed theory that the gods were aliens. UFO cults would probably spring up, believing that I had been killed by the aliens. Or maybe they would say I was killed by the government so I couldn't prove that Jupiter and his fellow gods had landed on a spaceship. No, I would live. Even disgrace was better than such a ludicrous legacy.

It was then that I noticed I was not alone. Up there on the road, a white car with dancing red and blue flashers had pulled to the side of the road about at the point where I had left the highway. A police officer of some sort was standing by the car, looking down at me. From where I was, I could see he was tall and slender, and when he began to move toward me, he was almost graceful. In spite of the cold, he wore no coat over his blue uniform shirt. He was hatless as well. I couldn't see his eyes though. In spite of the grayness of the day, he wore mirrored sunglasses. In short, he acted as if it were a mild spring day instead of a cold, dreary one.

He tapped on my car window. Nearly paralyzed from my near catastrophe, I suddenly realized I should have gotten out of the car to greet him. Fumbling, I managed to put down the car window.

"Having trouble?" he asked calmly.

"Yes... yes I am," I answered, very happy he was there to help me. I had been so startled by the mishap that I might have sat there stunned until I froze.

"Are you all right?"

"I think so," I responded. I got out of the damaged car as he opened the door for me. "I'm just a little shaken up."

"I'll take you back to town," he offered. With that, he turned and started

back to get his police car without waiting for my response.

“What about my car?” I asked.

“It will be taken care of,” he replied tonelessly, never bothering to turn around.

I wasn’t sure if he’d even wait for me if I stayed next to my car. So I hurried up the embankment after him, nearly slipping to the ground more than once. Yet the officer had had no trouble climbing the hill. He had seemed to ignore the snow and ice completely.

An odd fellow, I thought as I approached the car. I looked down at the crest on the door. It was the typical blue shield with what appeared to be an eagle in flight in the center. Below it in black were the words ‘City of Ovid.’ I had never heard of Ovid, Oklahoma, but then again I had never heard of the past dozen or so towns I had driven through. Well, as long as it was big enough for me to arrange new transportation and be on my way, it would suffice. Did small towns have car rental agencies? I wasn’t exactly sure. If not, I would have to pay someone to get me to the nearest large town.

Our drive was conducted in silence. Not once did the strange officer—Officer Mercer, I noted from his nametag—speak. That was all right with me. I had no desire to strike up a long-winded conversation with some country constable. Of course, I had to admit, Officer Mercer didn’t look like the stereotype of a small town police officer that I held in my mind. In some ways, he even looked familiar. Although I could not see his eyes under the dark lenses, there was something vaguely recognizable about him, as if I had seen him or at least his picture before.

Ovid was a much larger town than I had imagined. If I had to guess, I would have placed it as larger than ten thousand but under twenty thousand residents. The phrase small town covers a lot of ground. In Wyoming or Montana, Ovid would have been considered a fairly large community, complete with a shopping mall and probably its own TV station. In the more populous Midwest, though, Ovid was just one more mundane small community—or so I thought at the time.

Two things struck me about Ovid—other than of course its unlikely name. I mean, who would have named a small farming community in Oklahoma after a Roman poet? The first thing was that in spite of apparent prosperity, certain establishments seemed to be missing. I had grown up in the Midwest, and I knew that I should have seen a *McDonald's* or a *Burger King*, or at the very least a *Pizza Hut* or *Kentucky Fried Chicken*. Instead, there were only local establishments. Oh, they looked prosperous enough. The largest of them, a 'Rusty's Burger Barn,' even sported a large neon sign which would have been impressive even for a national franchise. The same was true of service stations and convenience stores. They were there, but they sported names I had never seen before, so I could only assume that they were local names. Why had national firms bypassed this little town?

The other thing I noted were the people. They were uniformly neat and well dressed, denoting again a local prosperity. However, some of them seemed to have an almost ethereal appearance. It was if I could see through them if I concentrated hard enough. I dismissed this as merely tired eyes, adversely affected by the tense drive. Perhaps I had even bumped my head slightly when my car skidded off the road.

In any case, Ovid had the look of a town that was almost too good to be true. It was almost like a Hollywood version that exhibited all of the virtues of Small Town America. I could imagine it was a town of high school marching bands and ice cream socials where the biggest social event of the year was the Elks Club chilli supper.

I had visions of being stuck in this proverbial burg for a few days while I awaited a rental car from Tulsa or some other nearby town where indoor plumbing was in vogue. I couldn't imagine a worse fate than being stuck in a place like Ovid for a few days while my professional reputation continued to unravel. At least, I noted from the signs, there was a small college in the town. I had never heard of Capta College and wasn't surprised by that fact.

Officer Mercer pulled up in front of an official-looking building that declared itself to be 'City Hall' from the letters carved in the granite

face. I braced myself for the inevitable forms which would have to be filled out to account for my accident. Sure enough, we were headed directly for the Police Department. I chastised myself for having an unreasonable fear of flying. If it were not for that, I would already be back in Los Angeles defending my besmirched reputation.

A very pretty black woman dressed in a uniform like Officer Mercer's smiled from her desk just inside the door. "Good morning, Officer Mercer."

"Good morning, Wanda," he replied with the first genuinely friendly tone I had heard from him. "You need to book Dr. Winslow here."

"Book me!" I cried out. I was too stunned to realize until later that I had never given him my name. "I've had an auto accident; I haven't robbed a bank! Why am I being treated this way?"

"The charge?" the woman—Wanda—asked as if I hadn't spoken.

"Reckless driving," came the reply.

This was too much. "I wasn't being reckless," I argued. "I was driving quite sensibly. Road conditions were responsible for my mishap. If you want to arrest someone, arrest your county maintenance department for improperly plowing and sanding the roads. I need to report this to the rental company and get on my way."

Officer Mercer looked at me through his mirrored lenses. "We will take care of your car." Then looking at Wanda, he asked, "Is the Judge ready to see him now?"

As if on cue, her phone rang. Listening for a moment, she replied, "Yes, he'll see Dr. Winslow now."

My eyes narrowed. "I get it now," I said, reaching for my wallet. "This is one of those speed traps. All right, so how much do I have to pay you to be on my way?"

"You need to see the Judge," Officer Mercer replied, surprising me as he gently but firmly took my arm and led me away.

It had to be a speed trap, I thought to myself. Many small towns in

America had run speed traps through the years. It was like a big game. The police and judges would arrest speeders travelling just a few miles per hour over the legal limit. They would then fine them, but the money would never make its way into the town coffers. They would split the proceeds, never reporting the cases. Many states had cracked down on the process, and the Interstate Highway System had routed around many of the small communities, so the practice had fallen on hard times. Apparently, I thought, it was still thriving in Ovid.

I expected to be taken into the magistrate's chambers where the fine would be discretely handled with outsiders being none the wiser. That was, I was sure, how such clandestine matters were taken care of. So I was surprised to be delivered to an open courtroom, complete with spectators. Well, one spectator anyhow.

Seated in the gallery was a very attractive blonde woman. She was seated, so it was difficult to tell, but it appeared that she might be pregnant. I wondered why she was there. Maybe like me she was awaiting a trial. Well, no matter.

Of more importance was the woman who sat at the defense stand. She, too, was very attractive—a brunette of about average height it appeared. And when she stood to greet me, I could see that she was most definitely pregnant, the lines of her blue business suit interrupted to accommodate a loose silk blouse that covered her gravid condition.

She gave me a professional smile and offered her feminine hand. "I'm Susan Jager, Dr. Winslow," she announced as I took her hand. Her handshake was unusually firm for a woman, I noted. "I'm your attorney."

My eyebrows rose. "My attorney? I wasn't aware I would need one." I felt myself fully qualified to represent myself in such a trivial matter.

"The Judge prefers it," she explained. "The proceedings here are a little... unusual."

"Yes," I replied drolly, "I'm sure they are." I was sure this would mean the fine would be even larger. Apparently, Ovid's little speed trap would involve payment of an attorney to 'defend' me as well.

“We just have a few minutes before court is in session,” Susan Jager continued, ignoring my comments. “As I understand the case, you lost control of your vehicle and spun until your car came to a rest in a ditch near a stand of trees. Does that cover it?”

I nodded carefully.

She returned the nod. “Fine. Then we can plead guilty and move to have the punishment waived.”

“Of course,” I said in apparent agreement. In fact, I had no intention of pleading guilty in that kangaroo court. I could see the plan clearly. I would plead guilty with the hope of a suspended sentence only to have this so-called judge throw the book at me. I would be leaving myself wide open to a large fine.

“All rise!” Officer Mercer called out, apparently acting as bailiff. “The Municipal Court of the City of Ovid, Oklahoma, is now in session, the Honorable Judge presiding.”

I rose to my feet and stared directly into the face of the Judge. When I did, my blood froze. I had seen the face before. Well, not exactly the face, but the eyes... They were the eyes that had stared back at me from countless statues in my travels. They were the eyes that the finest sculptors of an earlier age had managed to somehow capture. They were the eyes of... No, it couldn't be! He was just a local magistrate. It was just a coincidence.

The Judge to most eyes would have appeared to be a man gracefully entering middle age. His hair and beard were both brown but with the promise of gray to come. His gold-rimmed glasses sat comfortably on a patrician nose, doing little to disguise the piercing blue eyes that spoke of both power and intelligence. His robe was pressed so neatly that its pleats looked sharp enough to cut through wood.

“Be seated,” he ordered. His voice was not the deep bass one might expect from a figure of such authority, but it was a voice that was obviously used to being obeyed, rich and confident with just the trace of an Oklahoman accent. He reviewed what I presumed to be charges placed before him. Then, after an almost inaudible “humph” he spoke.

“The Court will now hear the case of the City of Ovid versus Dr. Thomas Winslow. The defendant will rise.”

I did, almost without thinking. To my right, Susan Jager also rose.

“The defendant is charged with reckless driving. How does the defendant plead?” the Judge asked.

“Your Honor,” my appointed attorney began, but she got no further.

“I plead not guilty, Your Honor,” I interposed. I had thought about keeping my mouth shut, but I can now admit that my ego got in the way. There was no way this country justice could be who he appeared to be. No, I told myself, I had merely been fooled by seeing a man in a black robe who somehow looked like a figure whose mythological essence had been sometimes captured in stone. In spite of everything, I had discovered on my expedition to the Eastern Mediterranean, I could not believe that I had stumbled across the proof in such a manner. This had to be just a bizarre coincidence.

To my surprise, the Judge smiled. “I thought you might,” he said calmly.

I said nothing, but I could hear my attorney sigh in frustration.

“You have been accused of reckless driving,” he continued. In another venue, this might have returned the fantastic to the mundane, but not here. There was a building presence in the room—a presence that made me feel suddenly uncomfortable. I began to become concerned. “I will address you directly, Dr. Winslow, since you foolishly seem to be ignoring the advice of counsel.”

I gulped. I had erred—of that I was becoming certain.

“I suspect also that you more than any other man to face me in this room have at least an inkling of who I am and what we are doing here.”

Oh my god, I thought. Why did I have to be right?

“That being the case, I will dispense with some of the trappings others find familiar and proceed directly to the issues at hand.”

I felt a small disturbance in the air. Then, when I looked around, I saw my attorney frozen in place. The blonde woman in the gallery was also stationary. Yet whatever the Judge had done, it had no effect on Officer Mercer, the Judge, or me.

The door to the courtroom opened and closed softly. From the corner of my eye, I could see that another woman had joined us, but I couldn't see her clearly without taking my eyes completely off the Judge. This I was unwilling—or perhaps unable now—to do.

“Then you are... Zeus?” I ventured. If I was wrong, I would look like a complete fool. But I was sure I was right. It was in concert with what I had learned on my expedition.

“I prefer the name Jupiter,” he said calmly, his eyes narrowed as he stared at me. “Here I am referred to quite simply as ‘The Judge.’ You are an unusual man to believe in me so readily, Dr. Winslow.”

“I have good reason to believe in you,” I told him, sounding more calm than I felt. I was in the presence of a being far more powerful than most people could ever imagine. With a wave of his hand, he could blot me out of existence if he wished. I had walked into the courtroom convinced I was about to be railroaded into an excessive fine. How I now wished that that were so. Now, I had come to realize I had much more to lose.

“Yes,” the Judge agreed. “Your expedition. Did you think we wouldn't learn of it?”

My heart nearly stopped. I should have known this was no coincidence. I had learned more about the gods in that one expedition than scholars had gleaned from centuries of research, for I had learned that they were very real. And my entire expedition had been funded by...

“The Olympus Foundation,” I muttered softly.

I was rewarded with a grim smile. “Yes, Dr. Winslow, the Olympus Foundation. We fund it, of course. The members of the Board of Directors you met were, of course, part of our pantheon.”

“But why did you finance me?” I asked. “You knew I would find what you had done.”

He nodded. “Yes, we knew. But as an old friend of mine in England once said, you must keep your friends close and your enemies closer.”

Was that what I was? Was I the enemy of the gods?

“By financing your expedition, we would be able to know what you discovered,” he explained.

“But you didn’t even have anyone accompany me on the expedition,” I pointed out. “Wouldn’t that have been easier for you?”

“Oh yes,” he admitted, “but it really wasn’t necessary. We knew by the reports you gave to the Foundation what you would discover. It has always been in plain sight for those who are willing to believe. We knew you would wait to organize your findings. That’s why we arranged your little speaking tour. We knew that would delay your published results and give us time to discredit your findings.”

In spite of my fear, I could feel my anger rise. “The stories of gods being aliens. You devised them to discredit me?”

“Of course,” he laughed. “It was necessary to lure you here.”

I reviewed the chain of events in my mind. I returned to the United States only to be informed that my speaking tour began at once. Then, once they had me in the Midwest, I was asked an innocent question which was misconstrued into the sensationalist treatment of my speech. Were Morton McKee and his daughter gods? Maybe not, but at the very least, they had been influenced by the gods. So I had cut my tour short. Come to think of it, it was strange that no one at the Foundation had objected, but I was too upset at the time to notice. Then, the weather had forced me further south and straight into Ovid. I had little doubt that even the weather had been part of their plan.

“So what now?” I asked, resigned to my fate. I did not expect to live much longer.

“Now, we continue the trial,” the Judge replied. “Formalities must be

observed, you understand.”

Again, I felt the subtle movement of air through the courtroom, and I could hear my attorney busily writing a note on her legal pad. She had no idea what had just happened. To her, no additional time had passed. I looked around at the blonde. She, too, was able to move again, and it was with only mild surprise that she looked at the new spectator in the room.

The new arrival had entered when time had stopped, so I had no doubt that she, too, was a god—or rather a goddess. She was very attractive and appeared to be forty or so with light brown hair fashionably but conservatively styled. She wore a business suit of winter white, and she sat with such poise and grace that one could almost expect her to be royalty. I suppose in a way, she was.

“The Court has no choice but to find you guilty of reckless driving, Dr. Winslow,” the Judge intoned formally. “Sentence will now be carried out.”

So I supposed in a way, I had been correct, I thought at that moment. It was a kangaroo court of sorts. The only thing was that the consequences would be much more severe. I firmly expected the next moments to be my last. After all, I knew things about the gods that no other living man knew—things which could actually change the way mankind looked at the universe. I braced myself for the fatal blow. Was I in fear of what was about to happen? I suppose I was, but in a way, it was gratifying to know that I had discovered something so important that the very gods themselves called for my death.

My body began to tingle as the Judge began to chant in an ancient form of Latin I had heretofore only read and never heard spoken. The words were powerful. They spoke of the very nature of reality and spoke of things I had never imagined could be. As the Judge stopped his chant, the tingling became even more intense. I looked down at myself. My chino slacks were rippling, as if they were being rewoven. In a moment that seemed to last forever, I saw that was indeed the case. They fused, the material becoming softer while the khaki color remained, and the fabric began to crawl up my legs until it reached

just above my knee, tightening along the plane of my legs.

So fascinated had I become watching the material that it took a moment for my mind to realize that something had happened to my flesh as well. My legs were now smooth, hairless, and far slimmer than they had been. And they were covered in a thin mesh which made them look almost tan. Involuntarily, I arched onto my toes, feeling shoes form under my feet with a two-inch heel forming under them.

I was being attired as a woman, I realized with a gasp. Then as a wisp of long honey blonde hair tickled my ear and lengthened before my eyes, I realized it was more than just my clothing. I raised my hands, seeing suddenly thin wrists and delicate fingers with nails which were fairly short but rounded in a most feminine manner and coated in a faint pink polish.

My chest rose and fell quickly as I nearly hyperventilated, but each time it fell, it seemed to rest above the level to which it had fallen last. Breasts were developing, I realized, beneath my shirt which had suddenly become a soft white woman's blouse, silky and feminine and so nearly transparent that I could see the lines of a bra beneath it.

I couldn't see my face, but I could feel it reshaping and I could taste something sweet on my lips. As I blinked my eyes, I felt the presence of longer eyelashes and felt my sense of color shift slightly. Then, I felt the final stab of transformation as I experienced a void between my legs that even my widened hips could not conceal. Dear God, I was a woman!

I looked up at the Judge who was watching the transformation with the mild interest of a being who had undoubtedly viewed it many times before. I looked about the room, feeling my longer hair swinging against my face. Officer Mercer and the three women in the room also showed no surprise. This was obviously nothing out of the ordinary for them as well.

"What..." I began, nearly choking on the word uttered in my new alto voice. "What have you done to me?"

“I should think the answer would be rather obvious, Ms. Reynolds,” he replied.

“Who?”

“Ms. Reynolds,” he repeated. “That is your name now. You are Alicia Sue Reynolds—Ally to your friends. It’s all in your purse over there.”

He nodded at the defendant’s table. There, next to my bemused attorney was a tan leather purse, very close in color to the heels I now wore.

“You’ll have time to look through it later,” he said lightly. “Right now, you need to get to work.”

Work? This was all happening too fast. I didn’t have any work here. I needed to get back to Los Angeles and my job at UCLA. What was happening here? I wasn’t this—what was her name?—Alicia Sue Reynolds. I was...

“Ally, we need to go.”

I looked up, still half dazed, to face the woman who had just arrived in the courtroom. She was looking at me calmly—almost primly—as if there was nothing out of the ordinary. “Go? Go where?” I asked in confusion.

“You’ll see,” she replied with a friendly smile. “Come on now. You have no further business here.”

I picked up the purse and dutifully followed her out of the courtroom, feeling for the first time the odd sway of feminine hips. And I was walking in heels, I told myself, unsure how my body could do that without stumbling. It was as if my body knew what to do even if my mind didn’t.

The woman led me out into the chilly air to her car, a nondescript blue Buick. So this was the chariot of the gods, I thought with grim amusement. Numbly, I climbed in the front seat as if I had been a woman all my life, sitting first before moving my legs inside the car to avoid problems with my skirt.

“There’s a coat for you in the back seat,” she told me as she started the car. “It’s supposed to get colder today, so don’t forget it.”

I looked in the back seat at the tan women’s trench coat. Yes, I would need it, I realized, suddenly aware of how cold my exposed legs had been as we had walked to the car. And the silky crème-colored blouse I now wore had offered little protection from the cold, causing my expanded nipples to harden embarrassingly.

“Who... who are you?” I managed to ask in my high, sweet voice.

“I am Dr. Miner,” she replied as she pulled out of the parking lot. “I am superintendent of Schools for the Ovid School District.”

“Miner...” I mused. “Minerva?”

She looked at me with the smile a mother might give a bright child.

“Very good, my dear, but I should warn you that you will not be able to speak our names in such a fashion unless we permit it—which we seldom do. Don’t try that again. The results are somewhat unpleasant. Now, we haven’t much time, but I need to acquaint you with your new role here.”

“New role?” I asked. “I don’t want to be here. I have important work to do. I need to get back to Los Angeles. I need to be changed back.”

Yes, looking back on it, I was babbling. I was just making a fool of myself. But I had never been transformed into someone else before, so I was a little at a loss as to how to handle it.

“Dear, we really haven’t time for all of that,” she admonished me gently. “You of all people should understand that what has happened to you is permanent. You are Ally Reynolds and will be her for the rest of your life.”

“But my work...”

“Your work never happened,” she told me flatly. “Your books were never written. Your expeditions—including this last one—never occurred. In fact, no one—even your old family—has ever heard of Thomas Winslow. Do I make myself clear?”

If I thought I had been shocked to find myself transformed into a

woman, it was nothing compared to what I felt as this... goddess informed me that I had never existed. My life's work—gone! It was almost too much to take. I felt a sudden urge to burst into tears, managing only at the last moment to stifle the urge with a hard gulp. I looked down at myself—or perhaps I should say the self that I had become. I was undeniably a woman, apparently from the delicate skin on the back of my hands a young one. There were objects hanging from my ears and the taste of lipstick and a nylon mesh embracing my slender legs. There was a bra restraining what appeared to be undeniably feminine breasts. And as for what was between my legs... I was most certainly not Thomas Winslow. I was someone else.

Dr. Miner saw the resignation in my face. “Good, now that that has been settled, I need to tell you what you will need to know to get started today. You’re really quite privileged, you know. Most of our newcomers are forced to make their own way discovering their new lives. Of course, most don’t remember their old lives at all, so it isn’t an issue for them.”

I remained silent and attentive. I had no other choice since I knew I was in way over my head. My ego was taking a very serious blow as I sat there in the car next to a woman who was in fact a goddess. When I had set out on my expedition, I had done so with the objective of securing my own place in history. I was about to prove something which would have seemed mere fantasy before my expedition. But I had never considered that the gods were still active and would not want anyone to tell their secret. I had paid for my carelessness with, for all practical purposes, my life. Thomas Winslow was no more. I knew that no amount of pleading or threatening would change that.

I looked down at myself. This was who I now was and would be for the rest of my life. I had no choice but to assume the role of Ally Reynolds. I would have to accept her life, whatever it was. So I decided to listen carefully and without comment.

“Ah, here we are!” Dr. Miner said lightly.

I looked up in time to see the car pull into a parking lot behind a sign that said Northside Elementary. Oh my god, I thought to myself as my

new role in Ovid began to dawn on me. There really was a hell.

"That's right," Dr. Miner said with a mischievous smile as she parked. "You are to be a teacher. You'll have third grade. The regular teacher is out on maternity leave. She started labor a little early, so that opened the job for you. It's temporary, of course, but if you do a good job, I'm sure Principal Dale will find a full time position for you next year."

"But I... I... can't teach children!" I practically wailed. "I don't know what to do!" I had had enough difficulty teaching undergraduates and they were for all practical purposes adults. How was I to teach children?

"Oh nonsense," she replied. "Now come on. Principal Dale is waiting for us."

"But what about... about everything else?" I asked, not quite sure what to ask first about my new life.

"Oh, the rest will come to you; don't worry, Ally. Just follow me."

I followed her in stunned silence, making furtive looks into the various classrooms we passed along the way. I could hear the giggling of small children which nearly caused me to shudder. Then there were the clear, precisely enunciated tones of the teachers. Would I have to talk like that? Was this really to be my fate, standing before fresh-scrubbed young faces trying to fill their little heads with the fundamental knowledge that adults take for granted? That was even worse than discovering I was a woman.

"Now," Dr. Miner said quietly to me as we walked down the hallway, "a little background information is in order. You've been working as a substitute teacher around Ovid this last year. Before that, you lived and taught in Iowa, but a divorce from your husband and an ailing mother on a farm not far from Ovid brought you back here. Your mother died last fall, allowing you to move into a small apartment here in Ovid, but it happened too late for you to get a teaching contract for this year."

She could see the calculations going on behind my eyes. “No, Ally, there was no inheritance to speak of. And you have no family. You should be happy about that since family never meant much to you. You are here all alone now with no visible means of support. You need this teaching job to put food on the table. And by the way, consider yourself fortunate. Most of our newcomers don’t get this much of a briefing, but I thought you needed to know these things so you don’t make an ass of yourself. It would make securing a permanent teaching job far more difficult, don’t you think?”

I was a little hurt that she thought I would mishandle this new life. Unfortunately, she was probably correct. I was not pleased with the role I had been given and would probably have said or done something wrong which might have cost me a permanent job. I needed to be reminded that I had no other choices but to play the role I had been given. I was certain I would have to remind myself of that often. The gods had decided what my fate would be. Whom the gods would destroy, they would first make an elementary school teacher.

“Here we are!” Dr. Miner said brightly, motioning me into the administrative offices. A plump fiftyish woman with light brown hair going slowly gray stood and came around her desk. Instinctively, I put my right hand out to shake hers but quickly found both of my small feminine hands being held by her larger ones, pudgy fingers wrapped around mine. I was shocked to note that Principal Dale seemed somewhat insubstantial. By that I mean it was almost as if I could see through her but not quite. It’s difficult to explain. Suffice it to say I was surprised at the warmth and substantial feel of her hands.

“Oh Ally, thank god you’re here,” she said with a bright smile, eyes twinkling. “Dana is watching the class for you right now. We were caught by surprise when Kristi had to go into the hospital this morning. You know, the baby isn’t due for another two weeks, but the doctor is worried about how she’s carrying it.”

There was a look of stricken concern on my face. To be honest, it was concern for myself and how I would get through all of this, but Principal Dale thought I was concerned about this Kristi person. “Oh,

don't worry, dear. She'll be just fine. It's not that uncommon, you know—or you will know some day.”

I hadn't thought of that. She was relating to me as if I was a woman—a woman who might someday get pregnant. Just when I was thinking it couldn't get any worse...

“Now Kristi left all of her lesson plans in her desk. I know you've never subbed for her before, so you'll probably want to review those plans tonight. These are very good kids, though. You'll have a fine class. You're lucky you didn't have to do this a couple of weeks ago when they got back from Christmas break. It took them a little time to settle down then.”

Yes, this was hell.

“Now, you'll probably want to freshen up a little before you go in,” she continued. She might as well have been telling me to check all of my gear before I went into combat. “You know where the teacher's restrooms are. I'll give you a few minutes and we can meet back here.”

I didn't know where the teacher's restrooms were, but she had motioned the direction with her head. First, I needed to talk to Dr. Miner, but when I turned, I saw she was gone. Come to think of it, she hadn't gone into Principal Dale's office with me. I suspected that as far as Principal Dale was concerned, I had shown up in her office alone.

I avoided the obvious error of going into the men's restroom. My new body gave me constant reminders of my new sex. I would never have been tempted to enter a men's room in a skirt and heels as the flesh on my chest and rear swayed softly and the long hair brushed against my ears and neck.

After struggling with my outfit, I managed to relieve myself. It didn't prove as difficult as I had thought that it might. I was quickly finding that if I just let myself go, I knew what to do, including wiping myself like a good girl. When I consciously pulled myself back from that trance-like state, I was standing in front of the mirror 'fixing' my lipstick.

That chore finished, I took stock of who I had become, seeing my face for the first time. I suddenly realized I looked a little like that woman who had played a teacher in *Kindergarten Cop*. What was her name? Oh yes, Penelope Ann Miller. Well, to be fair, I suppose I wasn't quite as attractive as her, but my hair was about the same color and length. My face wasn't quite as cute as hers, my nose being a little straighter and my eyes not quite as attractive, and my hair was a little longer, but on the whole, I wasn't a bad looking woman.

Strangely, that thought didn't bother me as much as it should have. I never had any strange hidden desires to be anyone other than the person I had been born as. Who I was had never been as important to me as succeeding in my chosen field. I supposed that had I been born black or female, or whatever else, I would still have been an archaeologist. To be honest, I wasn't really much of a sexual being at all. Our society tends to attempt to define men and women as heterosexual or homosexual, but it seldom categorizes them by degree.

By that, I mean I had always considered myself a heterosexual male, but I hadn't followed the normal heterosexual pattern of finding a woman to make my wife and live happily ever after. I had been male second and an archaeologist first. Given the choice of uncovering an artefact or bedding a woman, I would have been happier with the artefact. Of course, I was hardly a virgin, but months would go between my sexual encounters and that was all right with me.

So there I was, standing in front of that mirror, seeing myself well for the first time. I was obviously a woman. I could do nothing about that, I was certain. I would find a way to live with that if I had to. But my sense of loss came not from my change of sex but rather from my change of occupation. I was no longer an archaeologist. If I were, by some chance, able to gain an audience before my former colleagues, they would not see me as an archaeologist. My degree, I was certain, probably proclaimed me to be the graduate of some small teacher's college, and even if I were to quote from memory every ruler of every ancient Persian dynasty, I would hardly be considered worthy of their

association. My sex would matter little to them, but my credentials would matter greatly.

No, I was an elementary teacher. I was deemed qualified only to impart fundamental skills such as basic arithmetic and English and science so fundamental that it was absolutely banal. I would have to stand before creatures barely out of diapers and try to mold them into human beings. I remembered the old proverb: whom the gods would destroy, they would first make mad. Well, if a classroom filled with thirty or so schoolchildren didn't drive me mad, what would?

Principal Dale was waiting patiently for me when I returned to her office. The only difference between her and an executioner as far as I was concerned was that she had a smile on her face. "Shall we go meet your class, Ally?"

"Okay." What else could I say? I was stuck as Ally Reynolds, elementary school teacher.

I knew in the next few moments how a condemned man must feel as he is led slowly down that long corridor to his foreordained place of execution. I tried to tell myself that if I had been able to teach Fundamentals of Archaeology at UCLA to a class full of bored students trying only to get an elective out of the way, I could handle a bunch of third graders. How old were third graders? Eight? Nine? What would I have to teach them? Were they even toilet trained at that age?

I wasn't sure I could handle the assignment, but I knew in my heart that I had no choice. This was the role I had been given by the gods—much to their amusement, I was certain. If I failed to do a good job, I was certain that my next assignment—if there was one—would be even more onerous. With a deep, heartfelt sigh, I followed Principal Dale into the classroom.

There were some basic math drills up on the blackboard, and a young boy was carefully writing the answer to one of them as the rest of the class watched. The boy was also somewhat transparent, as was the teacher who Principal Dale had explained was her Assistant Principal.

A furtive glance at the class showed most of the students to be like them. It was like watching a piece of film that had been double exposed. Yet I knew from my physical contact with the principal that these beings were as solid as I was.

As for the rest of the class, they appeared to be normal children. They were uniformly neat and appeared normal in all regards. I found myself wondering, though, just how many of the real ones were like me—transformed from another life to this strange new existence in Ovid. Had they all been children before, or was I looking at adults who had been regressed by the power of the Judge? My guess was that they were all transformed. No real person in Ovid was the individual they had come to the town as originally. And what had Dr. Miner said? She mentioned that most of the transformees didn't even remember who they had been before Ovid. That made me feel terribly isolated.

"Class!" Principal Dale called out in a gentle but authoritative voice which bespoke of many years in the classroom. "This is Ms. Winters' replacement for the next few weeks. This is Ms. Reynolds. Now let's all welcome Ms. Reynolds to Northside Elementary."

A loud, shrill chorus of "hi" and "hello Ms. Reynolds" assaulted my ears, and it was all I could do to keep from turning and running from the room. Drawing on reserves I didn't even know I had, I managed a nervous smile in return. After all, I couldn't allow myself to be intimidated by a room full of eight year olds, could I?

Principal Dale said quietly to me, "I'll leave Dana in here to teach the rest of this period. Then it will be time for recess and she can turn the class over to you."

Dana Johnson, the assistant principal, was a cheery woman. Her bright red hair and tall, slender figure were the opposite of Principal Dale's, but she had the same pleasant demeanor. I watched in silence as she conducted the class through the rest of their math period. As I watched her in action, I became even more concerned, for Dana was masterful in the way she controlled the class.

I began to realize that my fears were well grounded. Certainly, I had

taught many students in my life, but they had been adults—or nearly so. Therefore, I had been able to treat them as adults. If the truth be told, that included pontificating before them, deriding them when their logic was faulty, and giving only begrudging praise when they were correct. I realize not all college professors teach in that fashion, but I was never comfortable teaching, so I was determined to make it uncomfortable for my students as well.

I realized I would not be able to do that now. If I pontificated, I would only confuse these children. If I derided them, they would probably cry. If I gave only begrudging praise, they would lose interest. I understood all of these things, but I didn't know how to correct them.

I tried to remember how it had been when I was in the third grade. It was difficult to remember that far back with any accuracy. My teacher had been a Mrs. Grundy. As I recall, she tolerated no guff in her classroom, but I didn't remember her as being a particularly harsh disciplinarian. How had she managed?

I decided I needed to watch Dana and see how she handled the children. She seemed very good at what she did, so she was undoubtedly a proper role model. By the time the period had ended and the children had been dismissed for recess, I was terrified. What I had seen was a woman who was much more than an instructor. She was a mother and a taskmaster at the same time, comforting and mollifying them one moment and demanding more from them the next. She seemed to know in an instant which role to assume, and the children responded to her exactly as she desired. I was hopelessly out of my element it seemed.

"They're a good class," Dana told me with a smile when we were alone in the classroom. "The class is a little large—there are thirty-two kids. With all the growth over at Vulman Industries it seems like there are new children enrolling every week."

I just nodded my head. Great. I had a larger-than-average class. Just what I needed.

"I know you've never taught here at Northside before," she went on,

“but I think you’ll find most of the kids are like the ones in our other elementary schools.”

“I’m sure they are,” I agreed, knowing there was no way Dana could understand what I really meant by that remark.

“We’ll have spelling right after recess,” she told me. “I’ll get out of here now and let you take over. Work with them on spelling until lunch. Then you and I can meet in the cafeteria and go over Kristi’s lesson plans. You’re lucky—Kristi is a good teacher, so all you’ll need to do is follow her lesson plans.”

Gee, I didn’t feel lucky.

The children filed back into the classroom in orderly fashion, taking their seats with a minimum of talking and giggling. It was time for me to take the stage. Nervously, I got to my feet. The unsteady stance I took was not entirely due to unfamiliarity with high heels. I steeled myself as well as I could for the ordeal that was sure to come.

“All right, class,” I began. “Before we start spelling, why don’t we all get to know each other a little better?” I was proud of myself for thinking of that. Not only did it sound right, it would occupy the first part of the class, and I had no idea how to teach spelling. “Let’s start over on this side.” I pointed to a cute little girl—one of the partially transparent children. She smiled and began to recite.

I really didn’t listen to all that they had to say. There were too many of them to remember what each recited. Besides, I had a seating chart which gave me their names and told me a little about them. I simply let each of them ramble on, nodding to them when they had finished, and indicating that the next child should speak. After all, the longer they spoke, the less time I had to worry about what—or how—I was going to teach them.

Some of the children were interesting, though. Generally, they were the real ones—or perhaps I should say the solid ones. First, there was Wendy Palmer. She was a very cute little girl dressed in a plaid skirt and black tights. With her long, curly blonde hair, her pert nose and round blue eyes, she was going to grow up to be a real beauty, I

thought. She seemed embarrassed to recite her life history to the class, and when she did, it was as if she was talking about someone else—someone whose life history she had been required to learn. I suspected she was one of the transformees who remembered her previous life. I wondered who she had been.

Then there was Eric March. He was a handsome, confident little guy. He reminded me of that kid in the Dr. Pepper ad on TV who swaggers up to the teacher's desk with a can of Dr. Pepper. The little devil practically leered at me, causing me to look down a couple of times to make certain everything was modestly covered. He was the son of a couple who apparently owned what passed for a department store in Ovid. From his confidence and bearing, it was obvious he was hot stuff—and he knew it.

Brice McHenry was just the opposite. Oh, he was a good-looking kid, with his dark brown hair and even deeper brown eyes, but he practically mumbled when he spoke. He seemed like a decent, studious boy if not overly gregarious. I could almost hear his little mind ticking away. I pegged him for one of the best students in the classroom, but his social skills would need work. In many ways, he reminded me of myself as a little boy. I wondered what he would think if he knew I had once been a little boy.

There were others as well who were interesting. There was a set of identical twins—boys—who were different in one regard: one was real while the other was somewhat transparent. Neither boy seemed to notice. I'm sure it would drive them crazy when they found I could easily tell them apart, for apparently there were only a few of us in Ovid who could detect the transparencies.

As I noted earlier, few of the children were not transparent. Out of thirty-two children, there were only seven who were solid. In addition to the four I had already noted, there was a small, almost scrawny girl named Lucy. She appeared to be mostly American Indian ethnically. I couldn't tell if she knew who she had been or not. She was rather quiet. There was Tony, a good-looking little guy who seemed to be just what he appeared to be—a young boy. He seemed to be very

popular, too. The other solid child was a rather pudgy little boy named Justin. He looked like an obnoxious lad. I vowed to keep a watchful eye on him.

The exercise had reinforced something which I had already come to believe—namely that transparent or not, each child in the room was real insofar as his or her classmates were concerned. I would have to treat them all the same.

Introductions out of the way, we went into the spelling lesson. Now, it was my turn to perform. I had the current lesson in front of me, since my predecessor had been thorough enough to do all the lesson plans. I thought it went fairly well, but the children seemed a little restless as they listened to me explain the spelling of the words. I think they were as relieved as I when the lunch bell finally rang after what seemed to be a stretch of days rather than just a little over an hour.

It was Eric who told me what was wrong. He lingered as the rest of the class rushed off to lunch, making no secret of their desire to escape my classroom. “Bad start,” he critiqued, shaking his head sadly as he stood before my desk.

My face flushed. What was this eight-year-old boy doing daring to criticize my teaching style? “I beg your pardon?” I said with as much ice as I could muster in my new feminine voice.

“This isn’t college, you know,” he went on, choosing to ignore my tone. “These aren’t graduate students; they’re children. You don’t lecture to them. You have to get them to interact with you.”

I looked closely at the boy, realizing suddenly that although he looked like a child, there was adult intelligence behind those blue eyes. Was he an adult transformed as I had been? I didn’t think so. I had already felt the subtle pressure of Ovid which would require me and others like me to conform to our new roles. No, I was certain no human adult changed into an eight-year-old boy would be expected to beard me in my own den. Eric was something more. Could he be an adult who had been transformed into a child? It was possible, but if so, he exhibited far more confidence than I would have expected. There was

something more to him than that. One of the gods? Yes, it was possible that he was. He seemed to have the same level of confidence I had seen in the Judge, Officer Mercer, and Dr. Miner. Each of them displayed a presence that was almost regal. Eric was no exception, even when packaged in the body of a small boy. Perhaps I should hear him out, I thought.

“Then what should I do?” I asked, as humbly as I could. I hoped I did it right. It was so hard to be humble, but the results of the morning class had taught me more than it had taught the children.

“Make them recite,” he explained. “Make them come up to the board and spell. Then ask the rest of the class if they’ve spelled it correctly. You see, they don’t have the attention span required to listen to a lecture. Besides, at this age, they learn better by doing than by listening to a stuffy lecture.”

Stuffy? My eyes narrowed as I looked down at Eric. “Who are you? It’s obvious you aren’t really an eight-year-old boy.”

As if to refute my accusation, he giggled just like an eight-year-old boy. “Oh, I’ll let you figure that out. And by the way, yes I am an eight-year-old boy, even if it is just because I choose to be. You’d best treat me as one, too. The other kids wouldn’t understand if you didn’t. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get some lunch so I can have some time to play before afternoon classes.”

He didn’t wait to be dismissed, running from the room suddenly with the bright smile of youth on his handsome face. Shaking my head in confusion, I left as well to join Dana for lunch.

“What do you think of them?” she asked once we had gotten our lunch trays and found a private table in the teacher’s section of the cafeteria.

“They’re interesting,” I said carefully, trying to determine how chicken chilli and cinnamon rolls went together with lime Jell-O. I resolved to bring a sack lunch in the future.

She laughed, “Yes, they are, aren’t they? Kristi always said that

they're the brightest class she's ever had. They seem to crave learning. It's the sort of class that makes you happy you chose teaching."

I nodded as enthusiastically as I could. After all, I needed the job.

"Have you talked to Brice yet?"

Brice? Oh yes, the quiet boy who reminded me of myself as a child.

"Yes."

"What do you think of him?"

Was this some sort of a test? No, I realized. The look in Dana's eyes told me she was guileless but concerned.

"He's quiet," I ventured. "But he seems like a bright boy."

"Right on both counts," Dana told me as she toyed with a carrot stick.

"I'm worried about him though."

"How so?"

She sighed. "He just moved to town with his father at the beginning of the school year. His dad works for Vulman Industries. I suppose a lot of our new residents are here because of Vulman. Anyhow, apparently just a few months before they moved here, his mother was killed in a car accident. Brice was apparently very close to his mother. Poor kid—he got uprooted from all his friends and lost his mother in the same year." She paused for a minute. "Ally, I'm worried about him."

Was I to be a child psychologist as well? I wondered. How many roles would I have to assume? I was beginning to feel as if I was more out of my element than I had ever imagined. Teaching at the college level was entirely different from this. At the college level, I was expected to impart knowledge. At the elementary level, I was apparently expected to wear many hats. I had to entertain, be a surrogate mother, engage in psychology, and who knew what else. And I was expected to do it all, I realized without any idea of my current level of pay, at a fraction of what I had earned at UCLA. Yes, it was most certainly hell.

To be honest though, the afternoon went a little better. It was spent in

reading and what passed for history at the third grade level. I made sure the children participated by reciting and reading and got a couple of approving nods from Eric for my efforts. I had to admit to myself that the participative method of teaching seemed to be easier on all parties concerned. By the final bell, I was actually feeling pretty good about my teaching style. I could do this.

A few of the children stayed behind to ask questions. At least that was their official reason. In reality, I think they just wanted to get to know me better. But one child, Wendy, hung behind, waiting for all the other kids to leave. When she was alone with me, she pushed her blonde hair back off her forehead and seemed to be working up her courage to talk to me.

“Ms. Reynolds?” she began tentatively. “I need to know something.”

“Sure, Wendy,” I said with a maternal smile. I had been practicing that smile all afternoon and thought I was getting rather good at it.

She was very nervous, as if she wasn’t sure what to say. At last she managed though. “Were... are... I mean, have you always been a girl?”

It would have been an odd question anywhere but Ovid. She was a smart girl. She could have asked me if I had been changed into a girl, but if I hadn’t remembered my previous life, I would find the question strange. “Well...” I drawled, waiting to see her reaction.

Her eyes brightened. “I thought so!” she said excitedly.

“What about you?” I asked, genuinely curious. “Have you always been a little girl?”

“God no!” she muttered. “I was a guy.”

I was actually fascinated. I leaned forward to hear her tale. Wendy was the first person I had met who, like me, remembered her previous life.

“I was a guy and I was sixteen—just,” she began. “My family lives in Tulsa. I even called them after I was changed, but they had never heard of me.” She sniffled a little at that. “It’s as if I never existed. I’m

stuck here—like this.”

“So what were you doing in Ovid if you were only sixteen and living in Tulsa?” I asked, finding that misery really did like company. I was fascinated with his—rather her—story.

“Well,” she said slowly, her face a little red, “I stole a car. It was me and another guy. We just wanted to ride around for a while. It was a neat car—a BMW 5 Series. Some guy left the keys in it and we just took it. But we got spotted by the State Patrol. They started chasing us and we tried to lose them.”

“Let me guess,” I told her. “You got lost and eventually you got picked up by Officer Mercer and brought to Ovid.”

She nodded, blonde curls bouncing. “That’s right. Reggie—he was my friend and the one who was driving when we were caught—he got changed into a little Indian girl, maybe three years old or so. He didn’t remember being anything else. This woman came in and he screamed ‘Mommy!’ Then she carried him away. It was spooky. I was scared—I mean really scared. I mean, I didn’t want to end up like Reggie. But then the Judge looked at me and started mumbling in some other language. I felt kind of a tingling sensation. I guess you know what I mean.”

I nodded.

“Then the next thing I know, I’m like this and some woman—one of the ones you can sort of see through—comes and takes me away like I’m her little girl. I really freaked out, but she acts like I’ve always been Wendy.”

“When did all this happen?” I asked, intrigued. Apparently, misery really does like company.

“Two weeks ago,” she sighed. “I just about went crazy at first. It was like I was the only person in the whole town who noticed something wasn’t right. Everybody else—even the ones who aren’t transparent—acted like things were supposed to be this way.”

“You haven’t met anyone else who remembers who they were?” I

asked.

She shrugged. “No. I’m a little girl. I can’t just go up to most adults and ask them who they were before the Judge got hold of them.”

“But you asked me.”

“That’s different,” she tried to explain. “You’re... well, you’re my teacher.”

“And that makes it easier for you to tell me this?” I asked, unable to understand her logic. Had the transformation made her think like an eight year old instead of the teenage boy she had been?

“I think so,” she admitted. “And most of the real kids don’t seem to want to talk about it—or they don’t remember. I’m really starting to worry.” She was on the verge of serious tears.

I hesitated before asking my next question. I think I was afraid of the answer. But I had to ask it. “What are you worried about, Wendy?”

She looked up at me, her pretty blue eyes brimming with tears. “I... I’m afraid I’m starting to like being like this.” It was all she could manage. She turned and ran. From the window of my classroom, I could see her boarding a yellow school bus, looking for all the world like the little eight year old girl she appeared to be.

I sat alone in my classroom, listening to the fading sounds of the last of the children as they left the school. I could hear the janitor’s broom being pushed down the tiled hall, the smell of the powdered cleaning compound nearly taking me back to my own elementary school days. It all seemed so normal when I just let myself go.

I knew that only a few hours before, I had been a middle-aged college professor and a man, but somehow that seemed like a lifetime ago. I could understand Wendy’s dilemma. The gods had made Ovid to be ‘normal.’ It looked like a small American town, smelled like one, sounded like one, and above all, acted like one. It would be impossible after a while for Wendy to act like anything other than the young girl the Judge had made of her. What else could she do but conform? Her ‘parents’ would not understand if she suddenly started claiming to be a

sixteen year old boy. Her new friends would make her life even more miserable if she started dressing and acting like a teenage boy. Adults would see her as a child. Boys would see her as a girl. She had no choice but to conform.

And as she began to conform, she would start to think like the little girl she had become. She would learn to giggle like the other girls when something funny happened, and blush like them when she became embarrassed. She would learn to play the games girls played and say the things that girls said. She would learn to dress like the other girls and act like them or she would be entirely alone in her new body.

In a very few years, she would go through puberty. She would remember her previous life—I was certain of that. But as the new hormones streamed through her body, she would become more and more of the girl she appeared to be. Her mother would teach her to apply makeup. Her friends would shop with her. A boy would kiss her. And then... And then, the boy she had been would fade into mental obscurity, replaced by a ravishing young blonde woman who thought that being Wendy Palmer was just fine.

With a sudden start, I realized Wendy wasn't the only person in Ovid who would be so affected. The same thing would happen to me, and maybe even faster. The female hormones Wendy's body was only starting to produce in substantial quantity were already working their way through me. I had all the memories and attitudes of my previous male self, but they were being filtered through a different brain and influenced by a different balance of hormones. Gone was the testosterone, replaced by estrogen—or some such formula. It was only a matter of time until the unaccustomed chemicals altered my very thinking. Would I be more emotional? Would I feel more maternal? Would I like men?

I was sure the answers to all of those questions would be yes. To make matters even worse, I wouldn't have the time or the energy to fight it. Why? Well, simply because I had to earn a living. I might know deep in my inner self that I wasn't Ally Reynolds, but no one else would. Or if they did know, they wouldn't care. If I signed a check at

the grocery store with the name Thomas W. Winslow, it would be refused. If I tried to walk into a men's room, I would be gently told I had made a mistake. Even if I could get in a car and drive back to my job at UCLA, from what Wendy had told me of her own experiences, I was certain I would find that there was no Thomas W. Winslow on the faculty. And even if there was a Thomas W. Winslow on the faculty, I was certainly not he.

"Ally?"

I looked up from my thoughts to see Principal Dale standing there. She gave me a warm smile. "So how was your first day?"

Oh, wonderful, I thought to myself. I had my sex changed, probably lost a lifetime of accomplishments, got thrown into a room full of post graduate rug rats, and got to wear a bra and pantyhose all day. Add to that, I have to sit down to pee now. What a wonderful day!

Discretion got the best of me, though. "It was just fine," I said with a smile of my own.

"Well, I promised Dr. Miner I would take you over to pick up your car. She told me you had already taken it in for service before you knew we had a job for you."

"That's right," I replied. I hadn't known that. I was also wondering about how I was going to get home. Come to think of it, I was really starting to wonder where home was.

"Well, grab your stuff," she said. "No sense in working late on your first day."

In spite of myself, I found I liked Principal Dale—or rather Marge as she insisted I call her as we drove to pick up my car. She might have a small problem with transparency, but that didn't mean she wasn't a real person—at least to me. She seemed genuinely to like her teachers. She participated in their lives without being obtrusive. Like college deans, she was probably politically adept within the boundaries of her profession, but unlike many deans I had known, she seemed unworried about how the actions of her teachers would affect

her career. Rather, her focus was on the students and what was best for them.

She dropped me off with a cheerful wave. I looked around the service department, suddenly realizing I was the only woman in the place. It was one thing to be seen by children and peers, all of whom were women, but it was quite another thing to be stared at by a collection of men, all dressed in blue Ford shirts, as if I were some sort of alien species. In a way, I suppose I was. As a man, I knew little about automobiles, but I could bluff my way through an auto service department. After all, I was a man. Men knew about cars, or so most mechanics could be convinced to believe. Now though, in my skirt and heels, no such assumption was possible. I was an interloper, alone of my sex in this male world. I fled for the cashier's window as quickly as possible.

Even in the administrative section of the dealership, I felt uncomfortable. I managed to turn my head to see a car salesman quickly look away, embarrassed that he had been caught staring at my legs. I knew I had been changed into an attractive woman. I mean, I probably wouldn't win any beauty contests, but I wouldn't have been out of place entering one. My figure was good and my face pleasant. I knew these things. I just hadn't learned how to deal with them yet.

My car had been in for a brake problem, now fixed. It turned out to be a Ford Probe several years old but in good condition. Apparently as a single teacher, my income wasn't good enough to afford much else. My bank account balance which I noted as I wrote the check seemed to confirm that. Well, that was one thing that hadn't changed. Professors of Archaeology weren't exactly wealthy men as a rule either.

Finding my home proved to be relatively easy. For one thing, my address was on the driver's license in my purse, and Ovid wasn't a terribly large place. There was also a small map of Ovid thoughtfully created by the Ovid Chamber of Commerce. And if that hadn't been enough, I was a woman now. I thought with a private smile that that meant I was entitled to stop and ask for directions—something men

seldom did.

Home wasn't exactly palatial. It was a small apartment in a modest complex near the town's modest college. I hadn't expected much more, and didn't really care. As a man, I had lived fairly modestly. My work was my life, and I had little need of luxuries. In fact, since I was often in the field on expeditions where luxuries were few and far between, it was best for me not to get used to them.

I kicked off my heels with a practiced move that surprised me and plopped down on the small couch that was the centerpiece of the mildly cluttered living room. I was pleased to see that Ally, like my former identity, was not much of a housekeeper.

A look around the room left little doubt that the resident was female, though. There was a feminine cast to the room—a frilly pillow here and a stuffed animal there. At least Ally wasn't into overtly lacy things. I managed to feel reasonably comfortable as I unwound on the couch.

I was alone, and somehow, it didn't feel right. I thought I knew why. As a man, I spent my days talking with peers—other professors and men and women for whom archaeology and the related fields were a passion. Even the students I interfaced with were for the most part adults. My evenings, if not taken up in some professional pursuit, were spent alone, and I was grateful for that. It gave me time to think and to plan what would come next in my impressive career.

Now though, I had spent the entire day around creatures whose lives had to be measured in single digits. The oldest of them was perhaps nine. Except for brief moments, I had not enjoyed adult intercourse and my mind craved it. There I was, alone. But being alone now seemed oppressive rather than relaxing.

I got out of my good clothes, putting on a knit sweater and a pair of jeans instead. I tried without success to ignore the bra I was wearing and what filled it—and the panties I was wearing and what didn't fill them. I did note that the body was well toned. Apparently Ally took care of herself. I resolved to do the same thing. Not only would it strengthen this female body which seemed so weak compared to my

male one, but it would allow me to become more accustomed to its operation. As a man, I had managed to stay in fairly good shape, in spite of a slowly growing paunch. There was no reason not to maintain good conditioning as a woman.

With that in mind, I found the freezer full of low-cal frozen dinners. I made myself one and settled down for the evening. I made the most of my time, going over as much of Ally's life as I could. As an archaeologist, I was used to piecing together the daily lives of people in long-dead civilizations, so piecing together Ally's—my—life wasn't all that difficult.

Apparently the death of my mother and subsequent sale of what was left of the family farm hadn't left me with much. Oh, I had over ten thousand in a savings account and my car was paid for, but my mother's illness had apparently sapped the rest of the family resources. I had no brothers or sisters, so what little had been left was mine. It wasn't a bad start, I thought, but it wouldn't last long if I had to live on it. It meant I had to work, so again the importance of keeping my new job was brought home to me.

There were letters from friends. Christmas was just over, so all the friends Ally had apparently made over the years had written to her. I wondered as I read them if any of the writers were real. Maybe the letters were just props, like the non-existent mother and my mythical former husband. I hoped they were real. As I read the letters filled with the records of the lives of people I had never met, I began to feel a need for good friends I had never felt before.

Now, that didn't mean that I had no friends in my previous life. As far as I was concerned, I had some very good friends. It's just that my friendships had revolved around my work. They were academicians like myself, and there were many professional opportunities for us to renew our friendships. That would not be the case in Ovid. I would have to find friends or face an endless parade of nights like my first one there—sitting at the table with a frozen dinner in front of me with no one to share my day.

Maybe I would buy a cat.

My first full day as Ally Reynolds began normally enough. I got up especially early so I could get a morning run in the crisp winter air. Running seemed odd in this new body. It moved differently but not awkwardly as I had feared. Given the substantial breasts and wide hips, I had expected running to be uncomfortable at best. Instead, I was able to move gracefully through the cold morning. And I was so much lighter than I had been as a man that it was actually exhilarating.

The run was followed by an invigorating shower where I tried once again without success to ignore the feminine configuration of my body. I had seen my body naked when I had gotten into pajamas the night before and I had tried to avoid exploring my new anatomy. I guess I thought if I didn't touch it, it wouldn't be as real. I really had no choice as I showered though, carefully washing myself in all the new places. I was surprised at how sensitive my skin seemed to be. And touching my breasts and between my legs just to wash them was almost a sexual experience. There'd be time to play later, I reminded myself. After all, I expected to be stuck in this body for the rest of my life.

Getting ready for work proved easier than I had thought. I managed to achieve an almost trance-like state in which I was able to dress and do my makeup with little thought. And with that, I was ready to face the world—and maybe even the third grade.

I was met by the normal good-mornings from both children and other teachers. I was proud of myself for remembering most of their names. I had always had a good memory for names, and I was glad to see that talent had not been taken from me.

Morning classes went fairly smoothly. I was starting to get a feel for the personalities of each of my students. I found to my surprise that the little devils were actually far more complex than I had imagined. That made them actually interesting. Oh, I still would have killed for some adult conversation, but at least it wasn't as bad as I had feared.

I got a little adult conversation in at lunch, eating with the other teachers. Most were older than me, and all were married. While I quickly tired of conversations about husbands and children, there were enough adult topics that I was able to get by. It seemed to be all

right with the other teachers if I didn't hold up my end of the conversation. Only one of them was not transparent, and she obviously had no memory of a previous life, believing herself to be the mother of three children.

"Well, come on, Ally," Rosemary DeLong, a fifth grade teacher called to me as she picked up her finished tray.

"Come where?" I asked blankly.

"Oh, you haven't checked the schedule," she laughed, her dark brown eyes twinkling. "You and I have playground duty this afternoon. Marge doesn't believe in letting any grass grow under our feet. You're already on the schedule with all of us old timers."

I joined Rosemary on the playground. She took the side with the older grades leaving me on the side with the younger children.

If I had known I was going to have to monitor the playground, I would have dressed differently. I had picked a pair of low heels, but I hadn't anticipated standing around on concrete sidewalks while the children played. Then there was the skirt. I had chosen a longer one than the one I had been dressed in the day before, but the weather had turned colder, and a cold breeze was playing around my legs, my nylons barely checking the biting cold.

"Ms. Reynolds!"

I looked around, forgetting for the moment my discomfort in the urgency of the tiny girl's voice. It was one of the girls from my class, and she wore a worried look on her somewhat transparent face.

"What is it, Vickie?"

"Brice is hurt!" she cried.

Brice hurt? "How bad is it?" I asked with uncalled worry in my voice.

"I don't know," Vickie replied, turning to run to Brice, expecting me to follow.

I rushed over to a prone figure, surrounded by several children. As I got closer, I saw that it was Brice. He was lying on the ground beneath

a tree with a grimace of pain on his face. His left arm was twisted at an odd angle, and I could see that it had to be broken.

“What happened?” I demanded, remembering at the last second how to squat down in a skirt.

“I fell out of that tree,” Brice mumbled, pointing with his good arm at a large elm tree over our heads.

“Nobody’s supposed to climb the trees, Ms. Reynolds,” a little girl I didn’t know said primly.

“So what were you doing in the tree?” I asked Brice as I carefully examined his arm.

“It was a dare!” the little girl declared.

Brice looked at someone. It was all clear in a heartbeat. Someone else had put him up to climbing the tree. Dares were common among small boys. I remembered a few from my own childhood. I turned quickly to see who he was looking at. To my surprise, it was Eric March.

“Eric, I want to speak with you,” I said sternly as I helped Brice to his feet. I held him close to me as I walked him into the school, Eric walking next to me on the other side.

When I had left Brice with the school nurse, I turned on Eric in the hall. “Did you dare him to climb the tree?”

If I had expected him to lie, I would have been surprised. “Yes,” he said simply.

“Why?”

Eric shrugged, not intimidated by me in the slightest. I could see I would have to press him for an answer.

“Eric, you told me yesterday I should treat you as an eight-year-old boy. What do you think I should do about an eight-year-old boy who goads another eight-year-old boy into doing something dangerous?”

“That would be entirely up to you,” he said, as if he were a colleague

discussing a completely theoretical point. "You might consider detention. That's generally the most effective course of action."

I stared at him, trying to see what lay behind those innocent blue eyes, but whatever it was, he hid it well. "What's going on, Eric? Just who are you?"

He replied in mock surprise, "Why, I'm Eric March, Ms. Reynolds. Who else would I be?"

I sighed, "All right, Eric March. I'll have the office notify your parents that you'll be staying after school tonight. You'll miss the bus, so they'll have to pick you up. I think an hour should do it."

"Fine," he replied, as if we had just negotiated an agreement. "Then if that's all, I do need to go to the boy's room before class."

I nodded and let him go. I thought about making him sit at his desk, but I wanted to go to the nurse's office to see how Brice was doing. Besides, it somehow seemed inappropriate to have a boy who acted more like the president of IBM than an eight-year-old sit at his desk. And I really wanted to see how Brice was doing. The poor kid seemed so lost and alone in class that I was afraid I'd find him frightened by the medical attention.

I wasn't wrong. There were tears on his little face as the nurse wrapped tape around his wrist. The nurse was one of the transparent people. She was an attractive young black woman who seemed to have a way with kids. Brice was trying to be brave as she spoke to him in soothing tones.

"Is it a broken arm?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "No, it's just a bad sprain. Kids Brice's age are pretty flexible. It'll hurt him for a little while. I've called his dad and he's on his way here. He's going to take him to the doctor for x-rays just to be sure. He should be just fine, though."

To my surprise, Brice leaped off the examining table and threw his arms around me, sobbing. I really didn't know what to do, so I did the only thing that seemed natural. I put my arm around the sobbing boy. I

don't know why, but the action seemed to comfort me almost as much as it comforted him. I had never been a particularly demonstrative person. If the truth be known, my touches during lovemaking had been perfunctory rather than fired with emotion. Why then did it feel so comforting to put my arm around this small body?

The clinical side of my mind gave me something of an answer. I was now a woman. That meant that my emotions were governed by a new set of hormones and instincts. Yes, instincts. We all have them. The animal side of our bodies can react to primal instincts just like any more primitive life form. Maternal instinct was an absolute fact. Many species—including human—had it. The female body I now wore had it as well.

I was forced to put the clinic analysis aside, though, for the tiny person who was clutching my skirt and sobbing his heart out demanded my attention. "It will be alright, Brice," I told him in as soothing a tone as I could muster.

It was then that I noticed for the first time the man standing in the doorway. He was tall, but not overly so. Given my new shorter stature, tall was a relative term. He had dark hair and dark brown eyes, and I knew almost—and there's that word again—instinctively that he was Brice's father. There was a stunned expression on his face as he saw us. I thought he was alarmed at the way I was holding his son. I tried to let go of him but he clutched at me even more. I guess I was thinking about the fact that had I still been male and been clutching the boy, someone might have gotten the wrong idea. As a woman though, I suppose it was expected of me.

"I'm... Ally Reynolds," I told him. Then I added, "I'm his teacher," in case the clarification was necessary.

"I know," he replied with a nod. "Brice told me about you, but he didn't..." His voice trailed off. Then, as if he suddenly remembered why he was there, he asked, "Is he all right?"

"He'll be fine," I told him, even mustering a little smile. "The nurse thinks it's just a sprain, but she wants the doctor to take x-rays just in

case.”

“I understand,” he said. “Shall we go see the doctor, Brice?”

The little boy looked up at me with those sad brown eyes. “Can you go with me?” he asked pitifully.

“I can’t Brice. I have to teach the class.”

“I’ll tell you what, Brice,” his father suggested, “I took the rest of the day off just in case. Maybe after we see the doctor, I can bring you back here to see Ms. Reynolds. Would that be okay?” He looked hopefully at me and I nodded that it would be all right.

“O... Okay,” he mumbled, reluctantly letting go of my skirt.

They were a touching pair, I thought to myself as they walked away together. Both were real people, and I found myself wondering who they had been in their previous lives. They seemed so close I wondered if they had been father and son before. Of course, knowing what I did of Ovid, there was an equal chance that they had once been mother and daughter.

Afternoon classes went well. To be honest, it was actually a little on the enjoyable side. Once I put my mind to it, I seemed to have a knack for dealing with the kids, and they seemed to like me. I found myself proud when I saw a look of understanding come over their faces as they understood for the first time some new idea or fact. I was proud of them and proud of myself. As a college professor teaching jaded students, I seldom saw such open responses. Ah, the innocence of children...

After school, Eric sat passively, reading a book during his period of detention. I wanted badly to ask him some questions, but I knew I wouldn’t receive meaningful answers. So I let him sit there, reading a book. I supposed that I shouldn’t have been surprised to see the title—it was a college level textbook on psychology.

“All right, Eric,” I said at last. “Your hour is up. Are your parents picking you up?”

He just smiled at me as he carefully placed the textbook in his

backpack. “Really, Ms. Reynolds, you of all people should know that won’t be necessary.” Then he gave me a little boyish smile and sauntered out of the classroom, leaving me to silently shake my head.

Moments after Eric left, Brice and his father appeared. I noted that Brice was wearing clean clothes now. Apparently his father had taken him home to get out his soiled clothing. I noted with amusement that his father had also changed and was now wearing a crisper sweater and pressed slacks.

Brice ran for me, stopping as he approached to push up his sleeve. His arm had been re-taped with a minimal splint supporting the arm. “Look!”

“It was just a sprain,” his father explained, “but it was a fairly bad one. He’ll be wearing this for a week or two.”

I smiled at Brice. “Well, it could have been worse.”

“Brice has something to ask you,” his father said.

Brice stood very straight and asked formally, “Ms. Reynolds, would you like to go to dinner with Dad and me?”

I hesitated. I hadn’t had time to review the rules, but I knew some schools frowned on fraternizing with the children—or their parents. But Ovid was a small town, and I imagined that rule wouldn’t work too well since there weren’t that many people to socialize with in the first place. And deep inside me, I wasn’t sure I wanted to spend another evening alone with my low-cal frozen dinners. I craved adult conversation, and Brice’s father certainly fit into the adult category. “Sure,” I finally replied with a smile. Brice looked relieved. Come to think of it, so did his father.

Patrick McHenry remembered nothing of his previous life. I knew that as we sat talking at a fairly private table in a pleasant little downtown restaurant called the Greenhouse. He told me about where he grew up (a suburb of Dallas) and where he went to school (Texas A&M) with a practiced ease that told me he really believed it. I, on the other hand, kept my personal responses to a minimum, but he didn’t seem

to notice.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” Brice announced as a waiter brought after-dinner coffee for Pat and me. “I can go by myself,” he added proudly.

When he was gone, Pat looked at me with a serious expression. “Ally, I need to tell you something before he gets back. You probably noticed I didn’t say anything about Brice’s mother.”

I nodded. I had noticed but had said nothing, but I had been warned how deeply Brice had been hurt by his mother’s supposed death.

“I was offered this job early last year and moved to Ovid. Mary—that was my wife—was due to join me as soon as Brice’s school year was over. One day, Brice got sick at school and Mary left work to pick him up. On her way to get him, her car was hit by a truck. She was killed instantly.”

In the short time I had been in Ovid, I realized that stories like the one Pat was telling me weren’t real, but the story was real to Pat. I was he believed every word of it. He could probably relate the details of that terrible ordeal. And it was real for poor Brice as well. The poor kid probably even blamed himself for getting sick that day. After all, if his mother hadn’t left work that day to pick him up, she would still be alive. Of course in reality, she probably never existed. None of it was real. But I knew that even though it wasn’t real, I had to treat it as if it was.

“I’m so sorry, Pat,” I said.

“There’s more,” he told me, his eyes closed as if to block the pain.

“Yes?”

“Ally, you bear a remarkable resemblance to my wife—to Brice’s mother.”

I nearly gasped. No, not from the shock of the coincidence of my resemblance. I’ve never believed in coincidence, or at least not to that extent. I had been set up. I resembled someone who probably never even existed. I resembled her enough to be attractive to Brice as a mother figure. Come to think of it, I was undoubtedly equally attractive

to his father.

Pat shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ally. I didn't mean to burden you with all of that. I just thought you ought to know why Brice is so attracted to you."

And why you are, too, I thought silently.

But what could I do about it? If I backed away from Brice and his father, I would be doing damage to two innocent people. They didn't know that they were being used as pawns. In my previous life I had been accused of being aloof and unfeeling on a number of occasions, but I had never been intentionally cruel. And I didn't intend to start being cruel now.

I made the best of the rest of the evening, being formally polite to Brice and his father. I don't think they noticed. They had already formed an opinion of me in their minds, and that opinion was that I would make an excellent substitute for Mary.

I still managed to get home early. Since Brice was just a boy, his father needed to get him home on time for bed. I was thankful we had taken separate cars to the restaurant. It gave me the opportunity to leave the moment the check was paid. I hoped I hadn't seemed too rude. Both Brice and his father had tried to give me a pleasant evening. And I had to admit, I found them both charming. I just didn't like being set up. It was too late to do what I needed to do, but I vowed to get it done the next day.

I got one of the other teachers to take lunchroom duty for me that next day and drove to the Ovid Municipal Building. I had had the late evening and all morning to let my anger build. It was one angry woman who stormed into the Judge's reception area.

The blonde from my court appearance was there. Apparently, she was the Judge's secretary. She was struggling with her purse and her coat, wobbling a bit in her very pregnant state. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"I need to see the Judge right now."

Caution clouded her eyes. "I don't think he can..."

“It’s all right, Cindy,” a voice from the intercom said gently. “Please see Ms. Reynolds in.”

She still looked a little uncertain, but she opened the door for me. I marched in.

“Please have a seat, Ms. Reynolds,” the Judge offered formally. He stood at my entrance, his dark suit crisp and fresh as if he had been standing behind the desk all morning.

With only as ugly a stare as I could muster with my sweet face, I sat. I was suddenly angry with myself for unconsciously sitting in such a feminine fashion—first crossing my legs and then fixing my skirt. To make it even worse, I could see the Judge was somewhat amused by the actions.

“I see you’re fitting in well, Ms. Reynolds.”

I held back my first impulse—which was to tell him to jam this whole town up his ass—since I was, after all, confronting one of the most powerful beings on the planet.

“Why did you do this to me?” I asked quietly when I had calmed myself down.

He smiled slightly. “I think you know the answer to that.”

I nodded slowly. “It’s because of what I discovered on my last expedition, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes, essentially it is,” he admitted, leaning back in his chair. He removed his gold-rimmed glasses and studied my face carefully. “There were other reasons as well.”

“Other reasons?”

He gave me the small smile again. “Yes. But we can discuss those later. You must surely realize that what you discovered could have serious effects on our plans. That couldn’t be allowed. It is far too important to us—to your race for that matter—that we succeed.”

“Mankind should be allowed to plot its own destiny,” I argued.

“I might agree with you if mankind was the only intelligent species on this world,” he told me, his voice becoming a little more stern. “This is our home, too, you know. The safety of the planet is just as much our business as it is yours.”

“Then reveal yourselves,” I countered. “Tell everyone what’s at stake. Tell them what you did long ago.”

To my surprise, he laughed. It was a rich laugh, full and boisterous. In that moment, I could almost see him in Olympus, a bolt of lightning in one hand, looking down on the Earth with amusement. “Reveal ourselves? You have searched for us too long. To you, we have been real for many years. You don’t understand that to nearly everyone else on the planet, we are only the stuff that myths and legends are made of. Mankind has enough religions already without adding us to the mix. Already more are killed on this planet in the name of God—any god—than any other reason. You would have us reveal ourselves and kill even more?”

I was silent. He was right. I had visited many parts of the world who were so certain their interpretation of God was absolutely correct—and they were willing to kill to prove their point, no matter what their religious teachings said about killing.

“No, Ms. Reynolds, your discoveries were far too dangerous to become widely known. The delicate balance that has allowed this world to survive this long would be greatly disrupted if they became generally accepted as fact.”

My eyes narrowed. I wanted to ask what that ridiculous story about the gods being aliens would do to his delicate plan, but then I remembered that by now, no one remembered that article. It had disappeared when Thomas Winslow ceased to exist. My expedition never took place. The Judge had thought of everything.

“So now what happens?” I asked dully.

“What happens now,” he told me, “is that you live the life you have been given.”

“Without interference?”

He looked hurt. “I don’t interfere, Ms. Reynolds. Whatever gave you that idea?” He then rose to his feet. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do—as I suspect do you.”

So I accomplished nothing, I thought to myself as I drove back to school. Here I was, a trained professional who probably knew more about the gods than nearly anyone else in the world. Yet I was as much a pawn in their game as someone who didn’t even know about the planet Jupiter let alone the god. The more I thought about it, I realized that the Judge had only said he didn’t interfere with my new life. That didn’t mean other gods didn’t interfere. To make matters worse, I was hungry and had missed my lunch. In fact, the children were forming up from lunch break to go back to class just as I pulled into the parking lot.

I had worn the lowest heel I could find with my outfit that day. I still nearly tripped as I ran into the classroom. To my surprise, everything appeared under control. I had expected a bunch of wild Indians when they got into the room and realized I wasn’t there.

I had to admit to myself as the afternoon went on that many of my conceptions about children had been wrong. I had assumed they were for the most part mindless little monkeys who were not mature enough to learn effectively. They lived, I thought, to play and run and make the lives of the adults around them as unpleasant as possible. Instead, they were polite, eager to learn, and for the most part well behaved. I wasn’t sure if this was really true of all elementary schools or just of Ovid. Of course, Ovid was all I needed to concern myself with.

Ovid was an idealized community, I thought to myself as the children read silently to themselves. Pictures I had seen of elementary schools around the nation often showed teachers dressed little better than undergraduates. Yet I had noted that all the teachers at Northside Elementary dressed very professionally. Not all wore skirts. Some wore pants, but they were still nice outfits. And the children were uniformly clean and well dressed. Oh, they wore the sort of clothing children wore anywhere, but their clothes were neat and appropriate.

Even the children who obviously came from less affluent homes were well scrubbed.

I began to wonder if that was one of the problems of our society. Perhaps we had become too informal. Society needs some structure or it falls apart. Was that the eventual plan of the gods? Were they trying to give us back the discipline we had lost as a society? Perhaps. But I felt there was more to their plan than that. Considering what I had discovered on my expedition, I was sure of it.

By the time the final bell rang, my stomach was making rumbling sounds. I had almost wished that the afternoon hadn't been so uneventful. That might have taken my mind off my hunger. It was probably part of being a woman, too. I found that I had to eat smaller meals since I would fill up quickly. The downside was that when I finally became hungry, I had little in reserve to work on. So when Brice put a crisp apple on my desk as the other children filed out, it was all I could do to avoid snatching it and devouring it like some ravenous beast.

"Thank you, Brice," I managed. It was so trite of him, but I loved him for it, and not just because I was hungry I realized.

He smiled shyly. "You're welcome." He didn't seem to be in any hurry to go anywhere.

As politely as I could, I reached for the apple and took a bite. Maybe it was just because I was so hungry, but the apple was fabulous. What a loveable stunt—bringing an apple for the teacher. But I could have kissed his little cheek for it. "It's delicious," I told him truthfully with a thankful smile.

His eyes brightened. He had been quiet and withdrawn all day—not an uncommon mood I suspected. "Do you really like it?"

"Yes I do. I didn't get any lunch today, so this was a perfect gift."

"Ms. Reynolds?"

"Yes, Brice?"

His face clouded. "Are you mad at me?"

I stopped in mid-bite, the tang of the apple and the flavor of my lipstick mixing in my mouth. “Brice, whatever gave you the idea I was mad at you?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “Well, last night at dinner... you were kind of...”

Reserved? Aloof? Distant? Rude? Yes, I was all of those things, especially when I realized what was happening. But I hadn’t meant for them to be apparent—especially to Brice. “I’m really not mad at you, Brice,” I told him gently. “I’m sorry if you thought that.”

His face brightened a little. Then, he asked, “Well, what about my dad?”

“What about him, Brice?”

“Are you mad at him?”

Was I? What possible reason did I have to be mad at him? “No, Brice, of course I’m not mad at your father.”

Now his smile was positively radiant. “Thanks, Ms. Reynolds. I hope you like the apple.” He turned to run and catch his bus. Then he stopped and turned back to me. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Ms. Reynolds.”

“Good night, Brice.” I watched him with a smile as he ran out.

I spent another one of those lonely frozen dinner evenings that night. It was my third night as Ally Reynolds, and the first night that I realized how powerful the magic of Ovid was. On my first night, I had been uncommonly lonely. I had chalked it up to the fact that unlike my previous existence, I had no driven purpose in my new life. Whereas before, I would have pored over a document written in some dead tongue for hours without end, as Ally I had little to do with my evening. The second night, I had been happy to be with Pat and Brice. Then when I got home, I was too angry at being manipulated to be lonely. But now here I was on my third evening in the role of a woman, and I felt very lonely.

Oh, I had work to do. I was starting to realize that keeping a class of third graders intellectually stimulated would take substantial hours

outside the classroom. No, it was something else. I fell back to my original theory that I was lacking mental stimulation during the day, spending it as I was among children. But to be honest with myself, it wasn't just that. After all, I had met with the Judge that day, and if that meeting wasn't intellectually stimulating, what was?

I hadn't felt so alone the night before. Of course, I had been out with Brice and his father. But was that evening intellectually stimulating? Not really, I supposed. Brice was just a child, no matter who he had been before. And his father, although quite nice looking, was not exactly a mental giant. I mean, he was certainly bright enough, but our conversation had been limited to non-intellectual subjects such as where we were from and...

Nice looking?

I shook my head. Now where had that thought come from? Since when did I describe a man as being nice looking? Oh, I might have said a man was distinguished or well groomed, but nice looking?

I had nothing better to do, so I analyzed that thought. What exactly did I mean by nice looking? Well, he was tall but not terribly tall. He was about the height I had been before my transformation, so I now had to look up at him, but not too far up. And his eyes... they were dark brown as I had already noted, but they were what kind of eyes? Intelligent? Well, yes, I suppose they were. Friendly? Yes, that too. But there was something else, too...

Attractive.

No, it wasn't that. It couldn't be that.

But it was, I finally admitted to myself. Pat had very attractive eyes. It was funny, I thought to myself, that I should notice that. Had being changed into a woman changed my perspective of what was attractive and what was not? As a man, I might notice a woman's eyes. But that wouldn't be the first thing I would notice. First, I would notice her build, her hair, her general face and then maybe her eyes. What did I think of women now?

I thought about the other teachers I worked with. Some were young like me—the kind of women Thomas Winslow would have been attracted to. And yet I had barely noticed what they looked like. Come to think of it, I had mostly noticed what they were wearing, or how they managed to keep hair as long as mine from getting in their face. I had even noticed the earrings one of the teachers had been wearing and commented on how nice they looked. I had thought at the time that I was just being polite, but I realized suddenly that the earrings really did look nice and I had only suppressed the errant thought of how they would look on me.

Then I thought about the men I had come into contact with since my transformation. There really hadn't been that many. There was the Judge, of course. Come to think of it, he was a nice looking man as well. He appeared to be in the graceful stage of middle age, although I realized it was only an illusion. Still, he was relatively trim, but not my type.

My type?

I moved on. All the other teachers were women, but I had seen a few men during the course of my day. There had been deliverymen at the school, fathers picking up their children, and the custodians were male. I was relieved to note that none of them had sparked any sexual feelings, though. Maybe women didn't notice things the same way men did. Maybe women looked at men differently.

It was time for an experiment. I flipped on the TV and decided to watch carefully to see if any of the actors or actresses caused any sort of sexual urges. The answer was not really. Then again, as Thomas, I can't say I got particularly turned on watching the sweet young things prance about the screen. I did notice that my eye was drawn to different things on the screen. If I let myself go, I seemed to notice the women more for what they wore and how they did their hair than how big their breasts were or how sexy their legs appeared. With the men, though, I would catch myself admiring their builds or watching their walks or... yes, looking closely at their eyes.

So okay, I told myself. My sexual orientation was changing. I was

certain only part of it was due to the new hormones my body was producing. A little magic had to be thrown into the mix as well. Of course, it was probably being helped along by the fact that I had never been terribly sexually active as a male.

Now, that didn't mean I had been some sort of a eunuch. Thomas Winslow had lost his virginity at sixteen. And as a student, I had been active sexually, although not to the point of being a campus stud. In my later adult life, I had considerable opportunities for sexual encounters. I was well known, reasonably affluent although hardly rich, and if I do say so myself, reasonably handsome. But colleges had begun to frown on faculty-student liaisons, and my libido had seemed to lessen even more as my professional stature increased.

It is said that nature abhors a vacuum. It might have been said that in recent years, my sexual life had been something of a vacuum. Now, with a new body and an entirely different set of hormones, those centers of my mind which I had allowed to atrophy were being awakened again, only with a different orientation. Strangely, it didn't particularly bother me. Now that doesn't mean I found myself wanting to bed wrestle with some big mindless hunk who was hung like a horse. No, it was more an intellectual acceptance than a physical need. I had simply reasoned that I was now a woman and that most women enjoyed making love to men. It logically followed that I would be attracted to men.

That night I checked out my new body with a bit more sexual curiosity. Now that doesn't mean I sat around mindlessly playing with myself. No, I tried to be clinical about it. Since my transformation, I had chosen to ignore my new body whenever possible. I was obviously female—a fact of which I was reminded several times a minute. But it is as easy to ignore the sway of breasts as it is to ignore the sway of testicles—particularly if you have other things on your mind.

And so many things I now did were almost autonomic. The wiping after peeing, letting my breasts drop into the bra cups before fastening, crossing my legs demurely—all of these things and many

more were so automatic that I didn't have to think about the fact that I wouldn't be doing any of them if I wasn't in the body of a woman. So when I say I checked myself out, I really meant that I did so for the first time with conscious effort.

I was both relieved and disappointed to realize I wasn't exactly centerfold material. Oh, I was cute enough I realized as I posed in front of a mirror, but my breasts were a little on the small side and my hips were feminine but not breathtaking. Probably my best features were a cute face and nice, athletic legs. I'd have to keep running, I told myself.

As any former male would do, I kept focussing on the neat triangle of hair between my legs. There was nothing unusual about it—for a woman. The phrase 'conspicuous by its absence' came to mind. It was almost as if I had awakened and found myself missing an arm or leg. The difference was that my new configuration was all perfectly normal—for a woman.

What would it be like—to be penetrated, I mean? I had no illusions about remaining chaste for the rest of my life. I wouldn't be an old maid elementary school teacher like the unfortunate stereotype of a previous generation. No, I would be a heterosexual woman in every facet of the expression.

Was that too clinical of me? Perhaps, but I knew that eventually I would surrender my body to some man. I was already becoming attracted to men. It was only a matter of time.

Part of me did want to resist. Part of me wanted to find a way out of Ovid and to convince someone in authority what had happened to me. In that part of my mind, I could imagine standing before an important figure—maybe even the President of the United States—wearing my new body like the body of a wounded war veteran as I explained to the man what I had found on my latest expedition and how it might affect the entire world. I smiled to myself. As if that would happen.

But then the more pragmatic side of my new being reminded me that I was Ally Reynolds, and there was no one in the world who would have

any reason to believe otherwise. And maybe the Judge was right. Maybe what I had learned on my expedition would cause great harm if imparted to the world. It would have gained Thomas Winslow fame—something which was very important to him. Unfortunately, it would only gain Ally Reynolds notoriety. And as Ally Reynolds, notoriety was the last thing I wanted.

So what would it be like—to make love as a woman? I closed my eyes and experimentally touched myself between my legs. It felt... different. It felt...

My reverie was broken by the insistent ring of the telephone. I jumped a foot in the air before picking up the phone at my bedside. With a flush of embarrassment, I realized I was still naked, as if that made a difference to the caller.

“Ally?”

“Yes?” I recognized the voice and flushed in embarrassment once more.

“This is Pat. Say, Brice is staying with a friend tomorrow night, and I wondered if you’d like to have dinner with me—sans Brice.”

Part of my mind screamed that things were moving way too fast. I wasn’t ready to go out on a date. While I might concede clinically that I would have to be a normal woman in all ways—and that included dating—this was all happening too fast.

But the other part of my mind held sway. It was the part of my mind that recognized I was lonesome, and Pat’s offer was too tempting to pass up. “I’d love to,” I blurted out before I could change my mind.

We talked for a few more minutes, finally agreeing on a seven o’clock dinner the next evening. The nice thing was that when I hung up the phone, I didn’t feel quite so lonely anymore.

The next day was Friday. I was actually going to make it to the weekend in one piece. Every day in the classroom was becoming a little easier, and I found myself actually enjoying the children in spite of myself.

Two of the children had become something of a special project for me. There was Brice, of course, who still spent much of his time in a self-imposed shell. At least he had made a friend. Eric March seemed to have made Brice his project as well, chumming around with him most of the time. I wasn't at all surprised to find out that Eric was the friend Brice was going to be staying with that night.

My other project had been Wendy. In some ways, her situation was like mine. Both of us had been changed into females some years younger than we had been before. The difference was that I was still an adult. Wendy had gone from the edge of adulthood to the heart of childhood in an instant. I don't think it would have been so bad for her if she had been changed into an eight-year-old boy. She had memories of that and could have coped. Now though, she was living completely outside her experience. To make matters worse, she had all the knowledge of a sixteen-year-old boy. She knew all about periods and back seat trysts. I found to no little surprise that as a boy, she had already experienced sex with a girl on several occasions. Now, only eight years old, she had several years before she would experience those things from the other side, and she was frightened half to death.

"I mean... what's a period really like?" she asked me that day at recess while just the two of us were in the classroom.

"I don't know," I had to answer. "I haven't had one yet."

"But you will," she pointed out. "And soon. I've heard that you can't get pregnant until you've been in Ovid at least three months, but you have periods just like any other woman." She paused for a moment. "When you have yours, will you tell me what it's like?"

"Hasn't your mother told you?" I asked. I was a little envious of Wendy to tell the truth. Her mother would teach her all the things a girl should be taught growing up. I would have to learn them on my own.

She nodded. "Yeah, she's told me, but it isn't the same. She thinks I'm only eight and talks down to me. Whenever I ask anything too embarrassing, she just smiles and says I'll find out about that some

day.”

I grunted in agreement. Yes, I could see that happening. A real eight-year-old might allow an adult to defer an answer, but Wendy wasn't exactly a normal eight-year-old. Every time her mother refused to give her a straight answer, she probably feared the worst. Mother, how painful is it? You'll find out some day, dear. No wonder she was terrified. I wasn't exactly looking forward to having periods myself.

“So will you tell me?”

I managed a smile. “Sure—if I survive my first one.”

It was the answer she had wanted, and the little note of humor I had added to it was just enough to make her feel even better. “Okay,” I said, “now that we have that out of the way, I have a question for you.”

She returned my smile. “Sure.”

“Why are you having so much trouble with math?” I asked her. “You have the memories of a sixteen-year-old. Yet you seem to be having trouble understanding multiplication.” Third graders were just being exposed to multiplication, and Wendy, an otherwise good student, seemed to be having trouble with the entire concept.

She reddened and looked down at her little sneakers. “I don't know. It's weird. I was really good in math back in high school. Here though, it's as if there's a block on my mind. I have to really concentrate to get the right answer.” She looked up at me in alarm. “You don't think I'm slowly losing my memories, do you? In some ways, that scares me more than anything. I'm afraid I might just wake up tomorrow and be like some of the others around here. You know, I might forget who I was and think I've always been a girl.”

“I don't think so,” I told her truthfully. “Do you notice how if you don't think about it, you act just like any other little girl?”

She nodded slowly.

“Well, it's the same for me,” I explained. “I find if I don't really concentrate, I act as if I had always been a woman. Most of the time, that's okay; it's sort of like camouflage. That's probably the way it is for

you. It wouldn't do for an eight year old to understand the binomial equation, would it?"

"I suppose not," she admitted. "So maybe the math ability is still there..."

I nodded. "Yes, but you'll have to concentrate to use it. It apparently isn't part of the natural things in Wendy's character. If you concentrate though, I think you can be good in math again. Okay?"

"Okay," she agreed, the little grin slowly returning to her face. "Thanks, Ms. Reynolds."

Before I could protest, she jumped at me and gave me a girlish hug before running out to join her friends for what remained of recess. I sat stunned. It wasn't so much my surprise at being hugged by the little girl. Rather, it was because I found I enjoyed it. More than enjoyment, I felt a sense of accomplishment. I had helped her—really helped her. It wasn't quite the same feeling of accomplishment that I had felt when I had successfully translated a stone tablet from some ancient city. But come to think of it, in some ways it was better because I had been able to see the true results of my accomplishment. The hug was like a medal. I wore it around my neck for the rest of the day.

The rest of the day actually went by very quickly. I had to admit that I was actually starting to enjoy my job. The other teachers were nice and the children were an entertaining challenge for my developing teaching skills.

Brice and Eric were the last to leave. "Mom's picking us up here," Eric explained. Well, no problem. I had a few things to do, so I let them sit and read while I finished up a little paperwork. Besides, I had plenty of time before my dinner meeting with Pat.

"Ms. Reynolds?"

I looked up at the sound of a woman's voice. There, standing in the doorway of my classroom was the most incredibly beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life. Now, I've noted that my sexual orientation was steadily changing, but that didn't mean I couldn't recognize great

beauty when I saw it. The woman before me had an absolutely perfect figure. And the medium gray suit she wore displayed that figure in a way that made it look sexier than the sexiest swimsuit. The gray was broken by her perfect, creamy skin, blue eyes that sparkled with intelligence, and hair the color of spun gold. When she moved into my classroom, it was with a fluid grace that I would never have dreamed possible. By comparison, I moved around like a lumberjack.

I stood awkwardly to greet her, feeling like the ugly duckling as I put out my not-unattractive hand to shake her absolutely perfect one. When we touched, there was a soft tingle, not unlike the one I had felt when I had been transformed.

It didn't take a former archaeologist to realize I was in the presence of a goddess. I had suspected Eric was one of the pantheon, and meeting his mother confirmed it. Their identities were now very clear to me.

"Vera March," she said to me in a voice that was both regal and sensual at the same time.

I knew already that she was Venus. Venus was supposed to be an unsurpassed beauty, and Vera March was the most beautiful woman I could ever imagine.

"A... Ally Reynolds," I managed to stutter.

She gave me a knowing smile. "Yes, you are. It's so nice to meet you, Ally. I've admired your work for some time."

I knew she wasn't referring to my teaching work, but Brice was in the room and would not understand if this beautiful woman started talking about my previous life.

"I've... I've always been a great admirer of you," I told her. It was true. I had always found her one of the most fascinating gods. I was now able to see why she had had such great influence in her time.

"Eric is enjoying you, too," she continued smoothly, still holding my hand. "I can see you'll be a great addition to Ovid."

"Thank you," I managed.

“Well now, I’m keeping you from other things,” she said, an almost dreamlike quality to her voice. “You have much to do to get ready.”

“Yes,” I agreed, the dreamlike quality slipping into my own voice.

“You’re very pretty,” she commented with a critical eye. “Yes, I can see what you need. Can you?”

“Yes...”

“Good.” She released my hand. I felt suddenly as if I had awakened from a long nap. She turned to Eric and Brice. “Come boys, Ms. Reynolds needs to get ready for her evening.”

The boys jumped up and ran giggling from the classroom. Brice was giggling because Eric was. Eric, on the other hand, seemed to find something that had just happened extremely funny. I wasn’t sure just what it was.

I know now that I was influenced by Venus. I would call it hypnosis, but that sounds so common compared to what she did to me. I practically floated home, my mind only on what I needed to do to get ready for my date. Yes, it was a date. I hadn’t really used the word before to describe my forthcoming dinner with Pat, but a date is what it was.

I had plenty of time and the day had been long. Why not take a relaxing bath? Now, I had always been a shower person, and to this day that hasn’t changed. Still, I felt a sudden need for a bath that afternoon. As I slipped into the warm water, it felt so good...

I don’t want to dwell on my hours of preparation for my date with Pat. Yes, I said hours. I think I was in a trance as I prepared for my date. The languorous bath was followed by a slow, careful painting of my nails. It was as if I had done it a thousand times before, yet it was my very first time. I selected lingerie and a dress with the confident assurance of a fashion model. I did my hair and makeup without a thought. I selected jewelry to complement my outfit with ease. I did all of this almost as if I were a passenger in my own body. For example, my hand would snake out to grab a dress; then my mind would say

yes, that's the one. Shouldn't it have been the other way around? Shouldn't I have decided first and then reached for it?

The next moment in which I felt completely in control of myself was as I stared into a mirror admiring my finished efforts. I had thought I was hardly centerfold material, but I was pretty damned cute if I did say so myself. My dark wine cocktail dress showed just the right amount of cleavage to be daring without being obscene. My hose were dark, too, and showed off a very fine pair of legs ending in feet encased in a wine-colored three-inch heel. My hair was lustrous and full, just touching my bare shoulders like an expensive stole. The gold of my necklace and earrings was a perfect complement to the healthy tone of my skin, and my makeup had been applied with the skill of an artist.

Where had I come up with the skills to appear so beautiful? I scarcely remembered any details of my preparations, but the results were spectacular. If I had had any doubts about who Vera March really was or what awesome power she had used on me, the mirror would have dispelled them.

My doorbell rang suddenly, shocking me out of my reverie. It was, of course, Pat, resplendent in a nice gray suit and stylish tie, the color perfectly complementing my dress. I almost expected flowers and felt a very feminine pang of disappointment that he hadn't brought any for me, but it passed quickly.

It's very difficult for me to verbalize the events of that night. It isn't that I don't remember them; quite to the contrary, I remember them vividly. The problem is that I remember them on two different levels—rational and emotional. While most people are able to blend the two into some semblance of reality, I felt that night almost as if I had been split into two entirely different people. The first person was whatever was left of Thomas Winslow. That person was rational and realized that he—now she—had been influenced by a goddess. All the inhibitions were there, trying to remain reserved and uninvolved. Unfortunately—or fortunately depending upon how I chose to look at it—that person was for all practical purposes a passenger.

The person in control was a much more emotional individual. Her

inhibitions seemed to have been set aside for the evening, and while she remembered clearly her life as a male, it was as if that life were now not important. She seemed to enjoy being treated as an attractive woman. She smiled sweetly when the car door was opened for her, and she kept stealing glances at her date on the way to the restaurant, musing at how attractive he was and wondering what it might be like to...

A strange negotiation was going on inside my own head as we were shown to a secluded table in a pleasant hilltop steak house called Winston's. There, surrounded by crisp linen, fresh flowers, and a glass of a nice Chardonnay, I began to feel the two sides of my mind subtly integrate each other into a single person. Maybe it was the wine or the Mozart violin concerto playing softly in the background, but I began to feel more comfortable with myself.

As a man, I had always enjoyed fine dining. I would miss my obligatory cigar after the meal, but a brandy and coffee was probably not out of the question. Pat proved to be a pleasant dinner partner. Unlike many engineers whose acquaintance I have made through the years, he was very eclectic in his interests. I was able to see him as an equal instead of just the father of one of my students.

And as I have said, somewhere during that most pleasant meal, my intellectual mind and my newly feminized self made peace with each other. What both sides discovered is that they liked Patrick McHenry very much.

I giggled just a little as I set my coffee cup back on its saucer. Using the coffee to wash down the last bit of dessert, I had had a momentary urge to call the waiter over to complain about the lipstick marks on my white china cup. The giggle came when I realized that the lipstick was my own.

"What's so funny?" Pat asked over his own coffee. Fortunately, we had both decided against an after dinner drink since we had both had a fair amount of wine.

"It's hard to explain," I told him, suppressing another giggle. I didn't

think he would understand if I told him I had never worn lipstick before that last week.

“Well, I assume this means you’ve had a good time this evening,” he ventured.

I answered without thinking as I looked into his eyes. “I’ve had a wonderful time.” It was true. I couldn’t remember the last time I had had such a good time at dinner. Now if I could have just had that damned cigar... Come to think of it though, I hadn’t noticed anyone in Ovid smoking. Perhaps the gods didn’t like smoking. At that thought, I giggled again.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have had that last glass of wine,” he said with a grin.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have had the last two glasses of wine,” I laughed. I had been having so much fun that I forgot my now-smaller body wouldn’t have the tolerance for that much wine.

“Well, maybe I’d better get you home,” he suggested.

It was a good idea, but I found I didn’t want to go home. How could I tell him that without sounding like a pouty bimbo? “Maybe I should take a walk first,” I replied.

He shook his head. “Even with your coat on, it might be a little chilly out there. That dress of yours can’t provide much warmth.”

“You don’t like my dress?”

He blushed. I had been a man recently enough to know that he absolutely loved my dress. “I just don’t want you to catch cold.”

“Well, then I guess home it is,” I giggled.

And home it was, but not alone.

I don’t know why I asked him in. Oh, I know it was partially the magic and partially the wine, but there was something else as well. I just didn’t want him to go home. I offered coffee, of course, and he gladly accepted. He obviously wasn’t ready to go home either.

I sat next to him on the couch. And yes, I sat very close to him. Somewhere in the back recesses of my mind, a tiny masculine voice was crying out in terror. The residual masculine personality knew exactly where this whole affair was going, and it was displeased, disgusted, and disturbed. I was seducing Pat, and I was having a wonderful time doing it.

When I had been a man, I was sure that I had the hardest part in a potential sexual relationship with a woman. After all, it was up to the man to seduce, was it not? Now, as a woman, I began to realize that my simplistic notion had not been completely correct. My female body tingled with anticipation. I wanted to tear off all of Pat's clothing and rape him on the spot. Whatever the Judge and Vera March—and her son—had done to me had made me very horny—a new experience in my new sex. But while all I would have had to do is say “come on, big boy,” that wasn't the way I wanted this to be.

How odd that I could change my perspective of sex so quickly, but I did. I was discovering that women want sex every bit as much as men, but they don't like to be aggressive about it. That sends the wrong message. It's almost like screaming “I'm easy” from the top of a tall building. The vast majority of women don't want to appear easy.

So the answer to a woman's needs is to do all the right things to make them think it was their idea. No wonder women seem to have the power to lead men around by the nose, I thought suddenly. If a woman can subtly cause a man to say and do the right things sexually, getting them to do anything else would be simple. I think in that moment, I began to realize how intriguing it could be to be a woman.

“Dinner was lovely,” I purred. The wine was wearing off, but it was being replaced by sensations that were at least equally euphoric.

“I'm glad you liked it,” Pat replied, staring at me over his coffee. I noted that he hadn't tasted a drop.

I stretched over to set my coffee down on the coffee table in front of the couch, allowing him a very good view of my cleavage. “I've really

enjoyed this evening.” And I was still enjoying it. I managed to glance down at Pat’s crotch and saw I was having a definite effect on him.

“I’ve enjoyed it too,” he replied, setting his own cup down.

We looked at each other as we rose back to a sitting position, but Pat’s face was closer. He was leaning forward. The poor male still embedded in my head was sending alarms that almost swayed me from my goal. Almost, but not quite. There were too many hormones and pheromones and soft moans going on then for the alarms to be seriously considered.

Our lips touched—chastely at first, then greedily. I could actually feel my nipples began to harden, and the sensation between my legs was as if I had suddenly come into contact with warm water.

From that moment on, my thoughts aren’t too clear. I knew what was happening, of course, and the rational core of my mind sought to analyze why it was happening. The rest of my mind didn’t seem to care. It had already surrendered to the needs of the body. An almost primitive impulse of wanting... needing had overwhelmed my senses, and although I sensed that these were not the normal needs of a middle-aged archaeologist, it didn’t seem to matter.

Sex as a woman... how to describe it? If I were to describe it to a man, it would be like trying to describe a sunset to a person who had always been blind. Suffice it to say that instead of pressure building to a climactic eruption as with a man, sex as a woman is more like a growing tides, waxing and waning with each new touch. I wanted it to go on forever, I thought as an orgasmic wave rippled through me.

So when the actual penetration came, any trepidation I might have expected was already gone. I needed Pat to complete what he had started. I gasped as he entered me—not from pain or surprise, but rather from pleasure. I felt complete, and the feeling of being alone I had experienced since my transformation eroded until it was gone, replaced by a feeling of belonging. This was right. I was Ally Reynolds—not because somebody told me I was, but because I wanted to be her.

Was it this moment that I reconciled myself to my new life? Not entirely. Rather, this was the moment in which I realized that I had reconciled myself. In fact, I had been reconciling myself almost from the moment of my conversion. 'What had I really given up?' I asked myself as I lay there snuggled in Pat's arms when we had finished.

Oh, I had discovered something which would stun some people, but the vast majority of mankind would not understand it—nor care about it for that matter, I realized for perhaps the first time. How would I have announced it? If I were to proclaim the reality of the gods and what they had actually done, it would probably have been received much as the erroneous report of the gods being space travellers had been—with derision and scorn. Others would have reviled me for my discovery.

Now Thomas Winslow would not have cared. After all, his fellow academicians would have lauded him for his discoveries—once they had accepted them. So what if the information had a disastrous effect on society? Wasn't the truth more important than the effect on the world?

Yes, I thought as I drifted off into a satisfied sleep, perhaps it was all for the best.

I slipped out of bed the next morning before Pat. I had surprised myself a little by waking with no remorse regarding my previous night's activities. I had half expected the residue of my male identity to have reared its ugly head when I was no longer in the throes of passion. But looking at Pat lying there, I felt my body tingle again. I had no excuse this time. The wine had worn off with no ill after-effects and I suspected the strong magical urging which I had experienced had now expired. No, whatever I felt for Pat now was too deep within me to be influenced by either alcohol or magic, and too deep for any lingering male prejudices to sway. For the first time in my life, I cared more about someone than something. It was a nice feeling.

I showered in a leisurely fashion, comparing the feeling of my hands rubbing my body to Pat's larger, stronger hands. Maybe I should have asked him to take a shower with me, I thought with a pleasant smile. I started to dress but got only as far as my lingerie when I thought I

should probably start something for breakfast. I put on a long, soft robe and hurried to the kitchen, starting some bacon and making some juice.

“Smells good,” a deep voice said behind me.

I turned and saw Pat standing there in just a pair of boxer shorts. I couldn’t help it. I looked down at the way his shorts were tenting out and smiled.

“But I’m not ready for breakfast quite yet,” he went on with an answering smile as he opened the front of my robe.

Needless to say, by the time we were ready for breakfast, the bacon was overdone.

The day was mild—much milder than I would have expected for that time of year. And the sun was bright if low in the sky. We made the best of the day, travelling to a place called Sooner Park where we walked along the pathways watching other couples and smiling at the children as they played. Most of the people we saw were the transparent type. Wendy had told me they were called ‘shades.’ I had chuckled to myself at the time, thinking about how appropriate that was. Apparently people like Pat who had no memories of a previous life didn’t even see the transparent aspect.

But a few of the people were real. Most were young—some even children—but all seemed to be happy with their lives. I was sure some of them remembered their previous lives as I did, yet they seemed happy with their new lives. Maybe they were even happier than they had been in their old lives.

Was that what Ovid was all about? I thought to myself as we walked. No, there had to be more to it than that. But whatever it was, happiness seemed to be a part of it. It was important that Ovid be a comfortable, happy community. Who was I to argue with that?

I took Pat’s hand as we walked. Was I one of those people—one of the ones happier in this new life than in my old one? When I thought of everything I had given up—my academic standing, my career, my sex—

I should have been as disgruntled as I had been at the hour of my transformation. But I wasn't. I was starting to enjoy the life of Ally Reynolds. Of course, I didn't know at the time that Ovid had a few surprises left for me.

We went to the March's house to pick up Brice. I hadn't known what to expect of the March's house. Given that in mythology, Venus was married most of the time to Mars, I guess I expected some sort of medieval fortress or something with Mars scowling over the battlements. Instead, Pat pulled up in front of a large, inviting two-story house, complete with a spacious, well-landscaped yard which had to be beautiful in the spring.

Vera March opened the door herself. She was dressed casually but smartly in a long woollen skirt and comfortable sweater. Even in so inconspicuous an outfit, she was stunningly beautiful. She smiled at us. "Come in, won't you? The boys are playing upstairs and will be down in a moment."

From the stairway, I could hear the sound of the two little boys giggling and laughing. It was understandable that Brice would be doing that, but Eric? Eric had to be Eros, the son of Venus and the personification of love. I had figured that out when I realized who his mother was. It had, of course, become clear to me that he had had no small part in making certain that I would meet Pat. He had dared Brice into a mildly dangerous stunt so that I would end up with a reason to meet his father.

I suppose I should have been upset at having been manipulated in such a fashion. Eros—as Eric—had made certain that I would meet a compatible man—namely Pat. I had even been made to look a little like Pat's dead wife. Then Eric's mother had wielded her magic to make certain that I was unable to resist an attraction to Pat which, given a more mundane path, might have taken much longer.

Yet I found myself unable to be angry with them. I really did like Pat. No, it was more than like—it was the beginnings of love. When I was with Pat, I felt something I had never felt before. The loneliness which had claimed me since my transformation melted like snow in the

warmth of his affection. It wasn't that I was unable to stop myself from responding to him; I wanted to respond to him.

I was a little self-conscious when the boys appeared. I was uncertain as to what Brice would notice. Would he note how closely his father and I stood next to each other? Would he notice how our hands brushed together? Would he notice the contented look on our faces? If he did, he said nothing. The same was true of Eric. That is to say, he said nothing. I thought I could detect a hidden smile on his face though. Well, since he was almost certainly Eros, he had to be pleased with the results.

I was still in a good mood Monday morning. Brice had been delighted to see me with his father. He had run up and given both of us a broad hug with as much strength as his little body could muster. Pat and I had taken Brice out for dinner, and it had felt as if we were meant to be a family. I had never wanted or needed a family before—or at least not since I had been a child—so the feeling had been both unusual and fulfilling to me. They had dropped me off at my apartment after a wonderful evening. Of course, I would have been very happy to find myself in Pat's bed once again, but that wouldn't work with Brice around.

Then Sunday, we all went back to the park together, followed by a movie. It was as if we were a family. I found much to my amusement—and satisfaction—that I had no trouble acting the part of a young mother. Brice seemed to accept me as such, and I found myself thinking of him as my own son.

My wonderful mood evaporated as I saw Marge Dale. She had come out of her office obviously to stop me before I reached my classroom. I could tell from the expression on her face that something was wrong. "Ally, could you come in the office for a moment?"

My smile became a look of concern to match Marge's own. "Sure. What about my class?"

"Dana will watch them for you."

Nervously, I followed her into her office. Seated inside was a woman

who looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't identify her. She wore an austere dress of dark brown which was draped chastely over her knees. Her flat-heeled shoes and brown tights added to nothing to mitigate her plain appearance, and with her almost nonexistent makeup and straight, featureless brown hair, she almost made nuns look stylish. She was also, I should add, a shade, although I had come to realize that being a shade made her no less real.

"This is Ms. Munson, one of the members of our school board," Marge announced nervously.

Ms. Munson placed her hands on her knees in a gesture which I took to mean that there would be no friendly handshakes. I was actually surprised to see a wedding ring on her finger. Apparently there really was a someone for everyone—even prudish shades.

"Ms. Reynolds, I'll get right to the point," she began in a shrill, pompous voice. "My husband and I saw you at Winston's Saturday night."

So that was where I had seen her before. I remembered vaguely a frowning woman a few tables away, but I had thought nothing more about it until that moment.

"You and a man were behaving in a most unseemly manner," she continued.

Unseemly? Pat and I had been laughing and having a good time, but that hardly constituted unseemly behavior, I thought.

"And on the next morning, we saw his car parked in front of your apartment building," she went on, sounding for all the world like a district attorney going in for the kill.

My eyes narrowed. "I hardly think my conduct is any of your business." I also realized she didn't just 'happen' on Pat's car being at my apartment. She had apparently known who I was and checked on me on purpose.

Her own eyes narrowed to match mine. "As a member of the Ovid School Board, it is most certainly my business. Teachers must set a

moral example for their students. If my husband and I observed this sort of behavior, others probably did as well.”

But others probably wouldn’t have cared, I thought to myself.

“I have asked Principal Dale to see to it that you are removed from the classroom pending disciplinary action from the Ovid School Board at this evening’s session. I will be making a motion to have you terminated at once.”

I don’t know what I would have said to her if I had had the chance, but as she rose and stormed out of the office, I was still too stunned to say a word. When she had slammed the door behind her, I turned to Marge. “Can she do that?”

Marge nodded sadly. “Oh yes, she can certainly do that. I’m afraid you made a very powerful enemy, Ally. She wields a lot of power on the school board. She got elected on a platform of waning morality in our schools. The rest of the board has been reluctant to follow her, so I think she’s been looking for someone to take to task since she was elected last fall. Oh Ally, why did it have to be you?”

Just a few days before, the prospect of being thrown out of the classroom would have had significant appeal to me. I wanted no part of being an elementary teacher. But the few days I had experienced with my class had changed my mind. I had discovered that this was the role of a true teacher—not gallivanting around the world on expeditions designed to impress fellow academics. And I had found I was actually good at teaching as well.

What would my class think? How would Wendy cope with this? She had begun to trust me and confide in me and become comfortable with herself as a girl. And what about Brice? For most of the weekend, he had treated me almost as if I was his mother. If I were dismissed, it would be almost as if he had lost his mother again. To make matters worse, the word would get around as to the reason for my dismissal. The poor little guy would probably blame himself and he’d retreat back into his shell. And what about the other kids? They had already lost one teacher during the semester. Now they were about to lose

another.

For that matter, what about me? I couldn't exactly go back to my old life. I was stuck in Ovid as Ally Reynolds for the rest of my days, but if I couldn't be a teacher, how would I earn a living? My reputation would be ruined. I might as well wear a scarlet A on my dress. What would there be for me to do in Ovid?

"Ally," Marge began tentatively, "do you have an attorney?"

Come to think of it, I suppose I did. I nodded.

Marge put a motherly arm around me. "Maybe you'd better see your attorney right away."

I did what anybody—or at least any woman—would have probably done then. I turned to Marge and cried miserably on her shoulder. Well, maybe not just any woman would have done that, but I did.

Susan Jager was very sympathetic on the phone and cleared her calendar to meet with me at once. I must have been a nervous wreck when I was ushered into her office by her secretary. Susan's face showed concern as she wobbled to her feet to greet me.

"Thanks for seeing me on such short notice," I said, taking her offered hand.

"You sounded as if you needed help in a hurry," she replied, motioning me to a comfortable leather wing chair. She eased herself down into a similar chair next to me. "Now tell me what's wrong."

I felt my face flush. The last time I had met with Susan Jager, I had ignored her advice. I had embarrassed her in the Judge's courtroom. Yet here I was now, desperately seeking her help. "Ms. Jager..."

"Susan." She gave me a warm smile that almost caused me to start crying again.

"Susan," I repeated, "first I want to apologize for my actions in court."

To my surprise, she laughed. "Don't be concerned about that. I was probably just as pompous as you when my trial was held."

I frowned, suddenly curious and forgetting my own problems. “Your trial?”

“Oh, of course,” she said. “You wouldn’t know about that. Everyone in Ovid—except the shades and the Judge’s ‘associates’ of course—goes through the same process. We have to face a trial.”

Actually, I had figured that out, but I said nothing. I had just not stopped to think about Susan going through this process. She seemed so natural that it was hard to imagine that she had ever been anyone else. Would I be like that someday as well?

“I was a prominent attorney when I came to Ovid,” she explained. That didn’t surprise me. There was something about her that belied her youthful appearance. Behind those pretty eyes was a keen legal mind, I was certain. “A prominent male attorney, I should add.” That did me.

“But...” I began.

“I know,” she laughed with a wave of her hand. “You thought I had always been a woman. Besides, what kind of a former man would ever allow himself to get knocked up?”

She took the words right out of my mouth. I nodded dumbly. In spite of how I had reconciled myself to my new situation, I had a difficult time imagining a prominent male attorney adjusting so well to her new sex.

“I suspect you’re already starting to understand how it could happen,” she observed, “or you wouldn’t be here with the problem you have.”

I gasped. “You already know about my problem?”

“Yes. Ovid is, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, a small town. I heard about your problem from Dory, my secretary. She had heard it over lunch from her daughter who’s a student at Ovid High. She had apparently heard it from one of her friends, but that’s as far back as I can trace the gossip. You know what they say about small towns—the only reason people take the local paper is to see how much of the gossip they’ll dare to print.”

“Then it’s hopeless,” I groaned. “Everybody will know. My reputation is ruined. I’d leave town, but I probably can’t even do that.”

She nodded. "You're right on that last point. Nobody leaves Ovid—at least not for good. On the first point though, don't be too sure just yet. Why don't you start by telling me what really happened."

So I told her. Yes, I told her everything. The funny thing about it is that I noticed I wasn't in the least embarrassed about making love to Pat. That is to say, I wasn't embarrassed talking to Susan about it. Was this how women bonded? If we had been two men (or perhaps I should say if we were the men we used to be), we might have bragged about our sexual liaisons—or not, depending upon whether or not we were gentlemen. But as women, it seemed simply natural to discuss making love. The key phrase was 'making love,' though—not 'having sex.' Had my tryst with Pat been just having sex, I don't think we would have been able to speak of it as freely.

Did I really love Pat? I had only known him a few days. The old me could have known a woman for months—perhaps even have slept with her—and not become as close to her as I had come to Pat. I was beginning to realize thought that as a woman, my needs were different. No longer did I want to strive for new honors. It was as if the facets of my personality which had striven for such honors had been turned inward, seeking instead security and companionship and—dare I say it—love. I had always been a goal-oriented person. Now, those goals were more modest. Or maybe they weren't so modest after all. They included the love of a man and the respect of my students. How odd, I thought, that I could change so much in such a short time. Magic? Of course it was, but I found I didn't care. This was who I was.

Susan smiled at my revelation. I hadn't so much as told her all of that, but there was something in the way I told her the facts that told her what she wanted to know.

I frowned though. "I screwed up, didn't I?" I asked her.

"Not necessarily," she responded. "I realize all this is new for you. I think sometimes the Judge changes some of us into women just so we can release all those feelings we kept bottled up as men. Sometimes, we don't know how to handle them and go a little out of control. It might not be so bad normally, but as an elementary teacher,

the moral standards get set a little high. I had an elderly aunt who used to teach school in some little town in Kansas many years ago. She told me she was prohibited by the school board from dating because it wouldn't look right.

"Now we've come a ways since then. I don't mean to imply that you couldn't date a man in Ovid without getting into trouble. The problem is that you went to bed with him and one of the town bluenoses found out about it. In fact, Ms. Munson is starting to develop quite a reputation around town."

"Just my luck," I groaned. "The first week in town and I manage to piss off one of the bigwigs."

Susan shifted to a less uncomfortable position. "I wouldn't call her a bigwig exactly. She got elected to the school board last fall on one of those 'back to basics' campaigns. You know what I mean. She believes our society coddles students too much and if we just went back to 'reading, writing, and 'rithmetic' we'd all be better off."

"Purely simplistic," I commented.

Susan nodded. "Exactly. She's the same way about morals. I think she and her husband must have a platonic relationship because I could never imagine her having an orgasm."

We looked at each other silently for a few moments before bursting into laughter. The thought of that old dragon gasping in orgasmic delight was too much for us to bear.

"Okay," Susan said at last, wiping a tear from her eye. "Enough of that. We need to figure out how to fix your problem. Now, I won't be able to say much if anything tonight. This isn't a trial after all. But the very fact that I'm there might intimidate Ms. Munson's would-be supporters a little bit."

"How much support does she have?" I asked.

"It's hard to say," Susan replied honestly. "No one on the board would support loose morals, of course. After all, this is a small town—in the Bible Belt no less. The question is how to mitigate what happened

between you and Pat so that the other members of the board don't rush to judgment."

I sighed. "How do we mitigate the fact that I jumped into bed with him?" I looked away. "Maybe I am a slut at heart. Here I've only been a woman for a few days and I've already been screwing guys—or at least one guy."

Susan patted my hand. "Don't be so hard on yourself. It's not as uncommon as you think."

Was that the voice of experience? I wondered. Very possibly. "So what do we do now?"

"Well, we better have an objective in mind. Do you just want to get out of this with your reputation intact, or do you want to keep your job as well?"

"Why, keep my job," I replied, almost to my own amazement. As a college professor, I loathed going into the classroom. It took me away from what I perceived as my true job. Maybe I had even been right in viewing things that way. After all, I had made some very important finds during my years in the field, and my latest discoveries were even more important, even though they would never be known now—at least as my discoveries.

Things were different now, though. I had no other mission to distract me from my role as a teacher. There was probably a little magically heightened maternal instinct in me as well. I was coming to think of each of the children as I would my own child. I wanted to see them grow and learn, and I felt pride in being a part of that process. This then was my mission in life—or at least in the new life I had been given. To be forced out of it would be even worse than the blow to my reputation.

"Then we have a lot of work ahead of us," Susan said.

Susan asked me a few more questions. Mostly they were background questions. Of course, my entire life as Ally prior to my transformation had been contrived by the Judge. Still, I answered the questions with

such confidence I could almost believe the answers were real. Then she sent me on my way, telling me she and Dory had a lot of preparation to do.

“Wear something conservative tonight,” she called out to me.

“What’s wrong with this?” I asked, motioning at the outfit I was wearing.

“The skirt is too short,” she replied with a critical eye. “Try to look a little matronly.”

Matronly?

I did my best. I was still a little new at dressing appropriately. Of course, I had found that if I just let myself go, my body seemed to know what to do. Apparently I didn’t have a lot of clothing that could be called matronly. My wardrobe was appropriately fashionable for a young woman in a professional occupation, but I did manage to find a long black skirt—a hostess skirt I later learned it was called. It had a slit up the side, but not far enough to be daring. Rather it just seemed to be there to make walking easier.

And speaking of walking easier, I wore flats instead of heels. It made me look a little shorter and maybe just a little more vulnerable. It was odd how I had gotten used to heels so effortlessly. It felt almost funny to get all dressed up without heels.

Then I slipped on a bulky turtleneck sweater. It was gray and drew attention away from my breasts, giving me a modest, demure look. I set it off with a gold necklace with a small gold heart dangling from it and small earrings well hidden by my long hair.

When I had applied my makeup, I did so lightly, giving me a fresh-scrubbed look. All I needed was a hymnbook in my hands and I would have looked as if I was on my way to church.

I didn’t look like the same woman who had entered the apartment just a couple of hours before. It was incredible how just a change of outfit and makeup could make such a big difference in the image I was projecting. Of course, men could do it, too, but not as definitively as

women. It was as if I could be a dozen different women—sexy, athletic, demure, pensive, helpless, whatever. No wonder women spent so much time on hair and makeup and selecting the right outfit. This was a valuable lesson I would have to remember.

I drove alone to the school board meeting. I thought about calling Pat but decided against it. It was bad enough that I would have to face the possibility of public censure without forcing him to endure it as well. Maybe I could even keep his name out of it. I didn't want him in trouble. And then there was poor little Brice. What would happen if he saw his father humbled before the crowd?

I hoped there would be just a handful of people at the meeting. How many people attended school board meetings? I had no idea. Surely it couldn't be many people, especially in a small town like Ovid.

My heart sank as I pulled into the parking lot of the Ovid Town Hall where the meeting was to be held. It was twenty minutes before the meeting and the parking lot was already full. Just my luck, I thought. I wanted to keep this private and low key, but the number of cars meant there would be at least a hundred people there.

Meekly, I made my way through the crowd. I didn't recognize many of them with the exception of Marge Dale and some of the teachers from my school. No, I realized suddenly—it wasn't some of the teachers from my school: it was all of the teachers from my school. Marge saw me, smiled and gave me a thumbs up sign that had to be noticed by the five board members who were already seated at the front of the room.

Susan motioned me to a seat next to her. I rushed up and sat down beside her, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. I wasn't able to avoid an icy stare from Ms. Munson though. If looks could kill...

"What are all these people doing here?" I asked her when I was seated.

"They're here because of you," she replied with a confident smile as she patted the back of my hand.

“Me?” I nearly cried. I had visions of all these people coming to see me chastised and terminated. I imagined that they were all God-fearing people who would cheer the school board for protecting the moral climate of Ovid.

Susan suddenly realized what I must be thinking. “No, that isn’t why they’re here,” she laughed. “They’re here because I called them.”

I gasped, “You called all of these people?”

She shrugged. “Well, not all of them. Dory and I just called some of our friends and they called their friends. You know how it goes. This is a small town. Everybody knows everybody.”

I was near tears. What was Susan thinking of? It was bad enough that the board would be there to witness my disgrace, but it seemed now as if half the town would be there.

Susan put a hand on my shoulder. “Buck up, dear, I know what I’m doing.”

I nearly jumped at the sound of a gavel. I turned my attention from Susan and looked at the five people who would be deciding my fate. There was Ms. Munson of course, looking as severe as she had looked the first time I had seen her. She wore a conservative business suit, and with her hair arranged back into a bun she looked as stern and unapproachable as she had looked in Marge’s office earlier in the day.

The other four looked a little less like the judges at the Salem witch trials. The only other woman on the board was a good deal younger and prettier than Ms. Munson with her red hair styled in a short but feminine fashion. She looked very serious, but there were little crinkles at the edge of her mouth which told me she could smile naturally when she chose to. She was probably a mother herself, I realized.

Of the three men, all I could say is they looked to be cut from the same cloth. Each wore a dark suit, white shirt, and conservative tie. One was mostly bald with a fringe of dark hair, one—the chairman—was a little older with iron gray hair and a small moustache, and the third

was as young as the redheaded woman. All five board members were shades, but all looked and acted like normal people.

I couldn't really get a feel for what any of them was thinking—with the obvious exception of Ms. Munson. While she glared at me with a vindictiveness that nearly made me cringe, the others appeared to be avoiding me entirely. None of them looked particularly stern or lax. Instead, each appeared impassive. I almost longed for the stern demeanor of the Judge. His mien was at least discernable.

"We seem to have quite a crowd here today," the chairman observed blandly. Then, allowing himself a small smile, "I assume not everyone is here to watch us open the bids for repairs on the roof at Ovid High."

That actually got a small laugh from the audience. I even smiled a little myself. I was actually a little relieved to see that the chairman had more of a sense of humor than Ms. Munson. Of course you didn't?

The chairman looked at his fellow board members. "Then I would assume that you are all here because of the hearing on Ms. Reynolds."

I turned as I heard someone shift in his seat and stand up. The standing man was about medium height and wore a suit as conservative as the members of the board. And like the members of the board, he was a shade. "That's right, Henry. Most of us in here have a child in Ms. Reynold's class. They've sort of elected me to speak for them."

"This is really out of order, Mr. Chairman," Ms. Munson growled, her eyes still fixed on me. "This is the business of the Board."

"Begging your pardon, Ms. Munson," the man said, refusing to back down. "Since we're talking about who teaches our children, I think it is my business."

I still didn't know which side the man was on, but it was obvious he didn't care much care for my friend, Ms. Munson. Of course, Susan had stirred all of these people to be there, I realized. I still couldn't figure out for the life of me why she had done it. It seemed to me that

there was a better than even chance that the parents who had packed the room would be happy to see their children's morally deficient teacher ridden out of town on a rail.

The chairman got in the act. "I think we can be flexible about this," he said, scratching nervously at his moustache. "Go ahead, Mr. Palmer. What's on your mind?"

Palmer! This was Wendy's father. I shifted nervously, craning my head around to hear what he had to say.

"Now I don't know what Ms. Munson has her pantyhose in a twist over, Henry," he began, "but I know my daughter just adores Ms. Reynolds." He paused for a moment. "Wendy's a sharp little girl, but she's been having some real problems in school. When I ask her about them, she just says something about not belonging in school. Now, I know a lot of kids go through that phase, but I'd be lying if I didn't tell you that Joan and I have been pretty worried about her.

"Then here last week, Ms. Reynolds took over the class." He looked right at me. "Ms. Reynolds, Joan and I haven't had a chance to talk to you yet, but I just want you to know we know you've been spending a lot of time with our Wendy, and to tell you the truth, she's a changed girl. I don't know what you've been telling her, but it's done her a world of good." He looked back at the chairman. "So you see, Henry, when we heard Ms. Munson here was out to railroad Ms. Reynolds out of..."

"Mr. Chairman!" Ms. Munson practically yelled. "I must protest this behavior!"

"Don't get personal, Charlie," the chairman admonished him.

"Nobody's going to be railroading anybody here tonight."

Was it my imagination or did the chairman suddenly look Susan right in the eye? What was going on between Susan and the chairman?

"Sorry, Henry," Wendy's father said. "I just thought you ought to know that we've got a lot of parents here who have reason to think Ms. Reynolds is a fine teacher. And we don't want to see her good name

dirtied or her job threatened.”

There was a loud murmur of agreement and even a little applause from the assembled crowd. I could see the board—except for Ms. Munson—was looking very uncomfortable. Ms. Munson just looked fit to be tied.

The chairman tapped his gavel again to quiet the room. “Now Charlie, we don’t want to drag anybody’s reputation through the mud, but Ms. Munson has brought some very serious charges to our attention.”

“I’d like to address those charges, Mr. Chairman,” a familiar voice called from the back of the room. Most in the room didn’t recognize the voice but I did. I gasped as I turned to see Pat standing in the doorway.

“I’m afraid I don’t know who you are,” the chairman said hesitantly.

“My name is Patrick McHenry. The reason I’m here is that I’ve been given to understand that Ally—Ms. Reynolds—had been accused of improper behavior. If there was any improper behavior, I guess I’m the one she was being improper with.”

Well, that certainly caused a collective gasp in the room. Anyone who hadn’t turned to look at Pat was certainly doing so by then. As for me, I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. I have to admit though that I felt a warm glow all over just knowing that Pat had leaped to my defense. No matter how this came out, I knew I had made the right choice giving myself to Pat. If I had it all to do over again, I would have done it just to be there watching him at that moment.

“Then you admit to improper behavior with Ms. Reynolds!” Ms. Munson said triumphantly.

“I admit to no such thing,” Pat replied evenly. “Since when is showing love and affection for someone improper behavior? What Ally and I did or didn’t do is absolutely none of your business. And it certainly has nothing to do with her ability as a teacher. I heard what this other fellow said about what Ally has done for his little girl. Well let me tell you, my son worships the ground she walks on. I didn’t think he’d ever

come out of his shell after his mother died, but Ally has shown as much love and affection for him as she would her own child.”

“The two of you were shacked up!” Ms. Munson screeched.

The gavel came down again. The look on the chairman’s face would have melted iron. “That will be enough of that, Ms. Munson!” He gave a quick look to Susan, then turned back to my accuser. “The board does not condone slanderous remarks.”

Ms. Munson knew when she was beaten. She slumped back into her seat, aware that none of the other board members were even looking her way.

“Mr. McHenry,” the chairman began uncomfortably, “I understand your position. The only problem we have here is that Ovid is a small town, and it’s a little hard to condone the sort of relationship you seem to be admitting to.”

Pat nodded. “I understand, Mr. Chairman, but I believe I have a solution to the problem.”

Silently, the chairman nodded for him to proceed.

Pat slipped his hand into his coat pocket as he strolled purposely down the aisle. To my surprise, he stopped in front of me. Then he got down on one knee. “Ally, I had hoped to give you a little more time and do this in a little more romantic setting, but it seems we have the welfare of the community to think of.” He gave me a little smile as he showed me the beautiful diamond ring in his hand. “I think I fell in love with you the minute I first saw you. Then as we spent some time together, I felt that love just grow and grow. Ally, will you marry me?”

They say when you think you’re going to die, time stops and your life passes before you. Apparently that happens to some people when someone asks you to marry him. For the first fraction of a second, I thought, how can I marry this man? I’m not really a woman. Then for the next fraction of a second, I became acutely aware of my body and the fact that I was, indeed, a woman and likely to remain so for the rest of my life. Then, I began in still another fraction of a second to

realize that not only was I a woman, but that I was a woman in love.
“Yes.”

The word just sort of slipped out, but I didn’t regret it for an instant.

“I have to credit you with an interesting solution to our problem, Mr. McHenry,” I heard the chairman say. “Now, I think it’s time we put this issue aside and move on to those bids for the roof repair.”

I assume he said all of this with a mischievous smile on his face. I couldn’t tell for sure, because all I could see were Pat’s eyes...

So that’s how I ended up standing nervously in the vestibule of the Ovid First Baptist Church waiting for the organist to start *The Wedding March*. I was going to make a lovely bride, I realized with one last look in the mirror.

Everyone was waiting anxiously for the ceremony to begin. Someone had thankfully provided a chair for my Matron of Honor—Susan Jager. She still had a few weeks to go but looked to me as if she could deliver at any time. She was handling it well for a former man. I hoped when my time came that I could do as well.

Marge and Dana stood beside her, telling her the usual horror stories of how it was when they delivered their first child. Susan’s eyes were predictably wide. I was lucky to have friends like them, I thought, as I watched the three of them, each looking radiantly beautiful in their rose bridesmaid’s dresses. I had never appreciated friends before my transformations. My world then had been divided between colleagues and rivals. Now... well, now I had friends.

Pat’s friends looked equally attractive in their dark tuxes. Both groomsmen were friends of Pat’s from work. One of them—Darren Cache—was apparently Pat’s boss. He seemed nice, and his wife was a beautiful Amerind girl who I felt sure would become a good friend in years to come.

Of course, Pat was already at the altar with his best man. Brice looked so cute in his little tux, and who better to stand with his father? I loved them both with all my heart.

“Is it time yet?” a small voice popped up. It was Wendy, my little flower girl. She had actually volunteered to take that role, surprising me with the request my first day back in the classroom.

“You’d have to wear a very feminine dress,” I had cautioned her. I had learned in my conversations with Wendy that the only time she ever wore a dress was when her mother forced her to, and on those days, she avoided everyone she could with an angry scowl on her face.

“Well, so will you,” she had replied with a little grin. “I guess if you can wear one, so can I. Besides, everybody will be looking at you—not at me.”

I didn’t think that was true in retrospect. Wendy made an absolutely adorable flower girl, and I had no doubt many eyes would be on her.

“In a hurry, are we?” another young voice called out. It was Eric, our ring bearer. I couldn’t help but think that he didn’t look like a child standing there in his tuxedo. He looked more like a small adult. Of course when I stopped to think about it, he was the oldest in my wedding party—save one.

“This dress is too thin,” she explained, “and I’m cold.”

“Really?” Eric said in mock surprise. “That’s a shame, because the dress looks terrific on you.”

Wendy looked a little shocked. “Do you... do you really think so?”

Eric nodded. “Wendy, I don’t think there’s any doubt. You’re the prettiest girl in our class. And I’m not the only one who thinks so. Tony Hunter said so, too.”

Wendy’s eyes were wide. “Tony said that?” Every little girl in my class stole at least one glance a day at Tony. He seemed to be the subject of every little girl’s fantasies.

Eric nodded. “Yeah. By the way, he’s going to be at the reception. Maybe the three of us can get together.”

Don’t overplay it, Eric, I thought. Well, I supposed when you’re the God of Love, it’s hard to take time off—especially at a wedding.

“Are you ready, my dear?”

I turned to see the Judge, resplendent in his tuxedo. Since I had no family as Ally, the Judge had agreed to give me away. I had found out from Susan that it wasn't the first time he had performed that duty. It was actually rather appropriate, I thought.

We were out of earshot of the others, so I smiled and said, “You certainly found a way to distract me from my discoveries.”

He smiled an indulgent smile. “Is it so terrible to be a woman?”

I shook my head. “It isn't terrible at all. In fact, to be completely honest with you, it would be terrible to go back to my old life. I'd lose so many friends... and Pat.”

He nodded. “I understand. As for your discoveries, don't you think now it is better if the world doesn't know?”

“I like to think that is the case,” I replied with a sigh. “It's hard to be sure.”

He took my arm in preparation for our walk down the aisle. “In this, you must trust me, Ally. There is more at stake here than you could ever know. If your discoveries had been unveiled, you might have been responsible for more chaos and destruction than you could ever imagine.”

I nodded silently. Thomas Winslow would have argued the point with him, but Ally Reynolds didn't have the immense ego to feed that my former self had. I made a vow then and there—a vow no less important than the one I would be making to Pat in a few minutes. I would never again speak of my discoveries—or even think of them if I could avoid it. The Judge was probably right, and who was I to say he was wrong?

My thoughts were interrupted by the pounding notes of the church organ. There was a flurry of activity as everyone found their places for the processional. The Judge gave my hand a fatherly squeeze, and I rewarded him with a daughter's smile.

Fame is not important, I reminded myself as it was suddenly our turn to start down the aisle.

Love is.

There were tears in Diana's eyes as my consciousness returned to the gentle clatter of the restaurant.

"Darn!" she said in a choked voice. "I always cry at weddings."

"You mean you weren't there?" Susan asked. "I thought maybe you came as someone else."

"I wasn't invited," she sniffed. "I haven't met Ally, but I will. I need to meet the person who almost..."

She stopped suddenly, and for the first time, I was sure she had almost told us something we weren't meant to know. Although I had come to consider Diana a good friend, she was still one of the gods. And whatever reason the gods had for creating and nurturing Ovid, Diana knew.

"Just what did Thomas Winslow discover on his last trip to the Mediterranean?" I asked pointedly.

Susan nodded. "It must have been pretty important for the Judge to want to get his hands on him so badly. But why such an elaborate plot? Why fund him in the first place if the Judge was going to do this to him?"

Diana sighed. "We couldn't be certain he'd find out... what he found out. We thought the secrets were well hidden. We knew what he had set out to prove. We just never thought he could do it. We aren't able to predict the future—at least to that degree. What he discovered though is one of our most important secrets. As much as I've come to know and love the two of you, I dare not tell you what it is."

"Will we ever know?" I asked. "I think all of us who have been changed by Ovid would like to know why."

"I'm sure you would," Diana agreed, "but thankfully, that isn't my decision."

Before I could say anything else, Susan's eyes became wide. "Uh..."

guys, I think it's time."

"What?" I asked stupidly, still thinking about the secret.

"It's time!" Susan said more insistently. "The baby, stupid. I'm going to have a baby!"

"Now?" I blurted.

"Damned quick!" was the response.

A cell phone suddenly appeared in Diana's hand. There were no cells in Ovid, but I was certain that wouldn't stop her. She punched in a number. "I'm getting an ambulance," she explained, taking charge quickly.

"Uh... Di?" I interjected as I felt a strange motion from inside my body.

"What is it, Cindy?"

I replied, "You'd better make sure that ambulance can take two patients..."

Ovid XI: The Bigot

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It was the most exciting spring of my life - either life. I was a mother! Well, technically, I was already the mother of a set of twins, but this was the first time I had given birth. The twins have been and will continue to be the light of my life. I feel as if I bore them even though I remember that they were really two of my fraternity brothers. now a young boy and a young girl, they have no inkling of their past lives. The same is true of my husband, Jerry.

But as I was saying, in spite of what most people in Ovid believed, I had just borne a baby for the very first time. She was a precious little girl, a little blue-eyed blonde like her mother. We named her Ashley.

It was so strange, I thought as I held little Ashley to my breast. One minute I had been a college student - a male college student - and the next minute, I was changed into a woman. It had taken me time to feel as if I really was a woman. But if there was ever a moment that I felt more like a woman than any other, it was while I fed little Ashley. I had followed the stories of other nursing mothers, but this was my first time to experience it, and I didn't regret it for a moment.

I had given birth to Ashley in early March, and it was now nearly May. I had returned to work after just three weeks - at least part time. My job was to basically be a living record for the new lives of those people changed by the Judge, the powerful god-cum-magistrate who had created and populated Ovid with the help of other classical gods.

To his credit, the Judge had been most indulgent when Ashley was born. He assured me I could take as much time off as I needed. I had appreciated the offer, but wanted to get back to work quickly. I really enjoyed my job, and there was too much going on in Ovid to miss any of it for long.

The Judge had also showered our new baby with gifts – nearly

everything we could need with a newborn. As a result, we had not needed to buy a crib, a stroller, or a car seat, as well as several baby outfits and toys. To make the Judge seem even more magnanimous, I should point out that he did the same thing for Susan Jager, my best friend and the one lawyer who practiced before the Judge. Susan had given birth to her baby boy, Joshua, within an hour of Ashley's birth.

But the most thoughtful gift of all in my opinion had been the gold identity bracelets he had given each child. They were far too large for the babies, but he told us to give them their bracelets on their sixteenth birthday, and we agreed. The bracelets were beautiful, formed from hand-shaped gold. Inside each bracelet was the child's name in ancient Greek characters.

"Is she asleep?" Susan whispered from the couch across my den.

"Almost," I replied. "How about yours?"

Susan nodded, pulling the sleeping baby away from her own breast.

"Where shall I put him down?"

"Just use Ashley's crib," I told her. "Ashley likes to sleep in her stroller."

When both babies were tucked in, Susan and I retired to the kitchen for coffee. Jerry had taken the twins to the park, and Stephen, Susan's husband, had tagged along to keep Jerry company. They had done it to let Susan and I have a little time together. It was the first time we had done so in weeks.

"So do you think she'll show up?" Susan asked, sipping her coffee.

"Diana? Of course," I giggled. "She seems to know when just the two of us are here. She'll want to catch up on the Judge's latest cases."

"What story do you think she'll pick?" Susan asked.

I thought for a moment. "Probably Patricia."

"Damn!" Susan said. "That was going to be my choice, too. I thought we could make a bet on it or something."

"A bet on what?" There had been a faint pop as air was displaced.

Suddenly sitting at the table with us was an extremely beautiful woman. She was dressed like us, in T-shirts and shorts - but her body was exotic - a cross of Middle Eastern dusky skin and dark blond hair.

Circasian was I believe the name of such a mixture. Whatever the name, she was beautiful. The goddess Diana had joined us.

"So what name are you using today?" I asked her, sliding a cup of coffee laced with cream and sugar - just the way she liked it – in front of her.

"Oh, what's in a name?" she sighed glibly. "You may call me Di today. It seems to fit for some reason."

"You seem very mellow today," I commented as I watched her daintily sip her coffee.

"Oh, it's just such a relaxing day," she said dreamily. "And after a lovely evening at a new club in Rome, I decided I'd better wind down in Ovid before going to bed."

I raised an eyebrow at that. I hadn't known the gods slept. Of course, come to think of it, she hadn't said anything about sleeping.

"I assume you wanted me to relate a bedtime story," I laughed.

"Well, it might get me in the proper mood," she replied in a sensual tone. "How about the case with the two prejudiced men?"

Susan and I looked at each other and together said, "Patricia."

"So who won the bet?" Di asked wickedly.

"We both did," I told her as I began to slip into my trance...

"Life would be a damned sight better if it wasn't for the lousy Japs."

It was Brooks who said it, but I had to agree. "Amen, brother."

Brooks lit up another cigarette from the tip of his last one. I never could figure out how he could smoke that much. A pack a day was all I could handle, but Brooks smoked at least twice that. And even when I

smoked, I often left a half-spent cigarette in the ashtray. Brooks smoked his cigarettes right down to the filter. I think he'd smoke the filter too, if he could keep it lit. Then about half the time, he'd light another one off the spent cigarette. When Hertz got its rental car back after we turned it in back in Tulsa, it would take them a week to fumigate it.

"I mean, we build a hell of a car right here in America," he went on, settling back in the passenger seat of the rented Ford Contour since I had volunteered to drive. "Why the hell would anybody consider a Honda Civic over a Ford Taurus?"

I shook my head as I kept my eye on the road. "Beats the shit out of me. Seems like people have short memories."

Brooks grunted in agreement. I didn't have to give him the whole tirade. People have short memories, I would tell men like Brooks. They forget about how the Japs sneaked up on us at Pearl Harbor. Hell, my grandfather even lost a leg when a sneaky Jap shot him at Iwo Jima. I had learned to have a distrust for the Japanese sitting on my grandfather's remaining knee. He'd tell me all about them, about how they were mindless little monkeys, and I believed every word. Why shouldn't I? Hadn't those sneaky slant-eyed bastards cost my father his job as an electrical engineer for RCA? With all the Sony and Panasonic TVs being dumped in the United States at cheaper prices than the Japs could buy them at home, how could an electrical engineer in the United States who specialized in consumer electronics hope to keep his job?

"Buchanan's the answer," Brooks went on confidently. How he could go on like that with the hangover he had to have was beyond me. "We get him in the White House, we won't have to worry about any more of this 'one world' shit."

"I couldn't agree with you more," I told him, feeling a sudden painful jolt in my head from my own hangover. How the hell could we have gotten so drunk the night before?

Then I remembered exactly how. Brooks and I had just finished a day

of training for the staff of the largest Ford dealer in Tulsa. That was what we did - we traveled around the country training the Ford dealers' service departments and evaluating them for the home office. It was the kind of stuff the zone offices did most of the time, but Dearborn was getting a little nervous about the service reputation at the car stores and thought a home office team needed to check up on the field every now and then. In a way, we were checking up on the local zone offices as much as on the dealerships. Had the reps gotten too buddy-buddy with the dealers? Were they letting things slide? With Honda and others challenging Ford every year for leadership in the mid-sized car market, we were an important part of the team.

Anyhow, we had gotten to know the service manager at the dealership pretty well. A muscular guy, he looked like he could pick up an F-150 truck in his bare hands. Tony - that was his name - was divorced and liked to party. Well, Brooks was divorced and so was I - and come to think of it, we both liked to party. At closing time, we said the hell with dinner and headed for a bar Tony knew.

"What's the action like here?" Brooks asked him as we stood at the bar, long neck beer bottles in hand. He reached for another handful of pretzels - our dinner that evening.

Tony shrugged. "Not bad." He nodded at three girls sitting together at a nearby table. All were dressed for action. There was a blonde, a brunette, and an Oriental girl. "Three of us - three of them. It looks like a plan."

Tony started to move, but I stopped him with my hand on his arm.

"Wait a minute, Tony. Who gets stuck with the Jap?"

Tony's brow furrowed and he looked down at my hand as if a bird had shit on his sleeve. "Jap? Oh... you mean Jodie. She's not Japanese - she's Chinese."

Brooks snorted. "See? She's a Chink - not a Jap."

"Yeah," Tony said. There was an unpleasant note in his voice. "Jodie Chang. She works for the Pontiac store next to us. What's the problem?"

Hell, I had started it. Me and my big mouth. I had been hanging around with Brooks so long I had forgotten how to be politically correct. But I wasn't so drunk yet that I didn't realize I had offended Tony somehow. "No problem," I told him. "You know how it is, Tony. We work out of Dearborn. Japs - uh, Japanese aren't too popular back there in the auto community."

"Yeah," Tony mumbled. "And those guys in Dearborn can all go piss up a rope. My brother's married to a Japanese girl. She's good folks."

"Yeah, right." That was from Brooks.

I silently groaned. Tony and I had been busy talking, and I hadn't realized just how drunk Brooks was getting. When he drank, he had to watch it or he'd start getting belligerent. I had made no secret to guys like Brooks that I didn't like Japs very much, but I kept my mouth shut the rest of the time. Too many people were "politically correct" these days. Unfortunately we had just run afoul of one of those people, and it looked like we might be headed for a fight.

Brooks was too drunk to sense the danger. I could see it in his eyes. He was about to bait Tony, and I could see Tony wasn't going to take it lying down.

"Japs, Chinks, Nips, Slant-eyes, Gooks, it's all the same," Brooks commented with an evil little grin. "All the slant eyes in the world aren't worth one American job and you know it!"

"Okay, big mouth!" Tony yelled and lunged for Brooks.

I was in no position to stop him. I had been leaning back in my bar stool and couldn't have jumped in the middle of them if I had wanted to - and to be honest, I didn't want to. Tony made two of me. Besides, I've never been much of a fighter.

Fortunately I didn't have to step in. Before the first punch could be thrown, a tall blonde guy stepped in between them. Tony was bigger than the guy, but he held his punch. It was almost as if he couldn't throw the punch for some reason, his fist hovering in midair without moving forward.

Then the blonde guy smiled. "No need for this," he said in a voice that while calm brooked no argument.

Now it was Brooks' turn to play the macho game. He tapped the big blonde on the shoulder and demanded, "Just who are you to break up a private conversation?"

The blonde smiled even wider. "The name's Apollo, and the management pays me to keep conversations from getting out of hand."

Apollo, huh? It sounded like a phony name - like a stage name. I had seen him before, though, and it wasn't in a bar. But I couldn't quite place him. He looked like the sort of guy you see in those sleazy flicks on Cinemax late at night - the kind that have bimbos in bikinis and guys in Speedos who end up screwing all over the beach. Well, if he ever had been in one of those flicks, maybe being a bouncer in a bar was a step up in the world.

Then he looked at me. "You know friend, I think your pal has had a bit too much to drink. Do you suppose you could take him back to your motel so he can sleep it off?"

I nodded. "Good idea."

I wasn't sure quite how I was going to accomplish that, though, but for some reason, the fight seemed to have gone out of Brooks. We left Tony behind and I got Brooks back to the motel without further incident. It wasn't until I was in bed myself that I started to wonder how the bouncer knew we were staying in a motel.

"Where the hell are we going anyhow?" Brooks asked suddenly, bringing me back to the present. He had been dozing and I had been driving without really thinking. I looked around. When had I turned off the Interstate? I looked ahead for highway markers. We were on a good two-lane blacktop road, but I didn't see any markers.

"I'm not sure," I muttered.

"Where the hell is the Interstate?" Brooks muttered. "How the fuck did you manage to get us lost?"

The hangover pain in my head took away any answer I might have formulated. Then I saw a sign ahead. It was a familiar-looking blue and white sign, a little faded, and it looked as if it had been there for years. At least it might be advertising something in the next town. That would help me get my bearings.

"Forester Ford," Brooks read, proving his vision was a little better than mine. "Then it says Ovid - Five Miles. You ever hear of Ovid?"

I shook my head. "Not as a town. I think we studied an Ovid back in college. He was some sort of a Roman poet. And I've never heard of Forester Ford. Is it on our list?"

We had a list of all the Ford dealers in the country with us. Brooks scanned the list. "Nope. It's probably an old sign. Most of the dealerships in these little tank towns have been closed for years." Then he looked at the map. "I don't see any Ovid listed either. It must just be a wide spot in the road."

But it wasn't. We drove over a hill and found ourselves in a valley surrounded by rolling hills. Farmland stretched out before us, crops just pushing up in the early spring sun. And in the center of it all was a town. It looked to be fairly good-sized - maybe ten or fifteen thousand people. Towns that size in the Midwest usually depended on agriculture and maybe some light manufacturing to support themselves. This town looked like no exception.

"It's big enough to have a Ford dealer," Brooks commented. "In fact, I'd be surprised if a town that size didn't have a Ford dealer."

"Yeah," I agreed as we approached the town. "So why don't we have it on our list? And why isn't this town on the map?"

Brooks didn't bother with an answer. It was just as well. We both knew the chances of both the map and our list being wrong were slim. The sign had said there was a Ford dealer in Ovid. Well, I had a funny feeling the sign was right. I had another funny feeling that there was something odd about Ovid. Just driving toward the town made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. If we were smart, I thought, we'd turn around and head back toward the Interstate.

As we got closer still, Ovid appeared - to my relief - to be a typical Midwestern town. The road widened to four lanes with the usual collection of gas stations, farm implement dealers and other roadside businesses. There was nothing unusual about that. What was unusual was how neat, well groomed and prosperous everything looked. Many farm towns have fallen on hard times, what with the price of many farm products low. That affects the communities that depend upon agriculture. That being the case, the town looked just a little too prosperous.

"Look! Did you see that?" Brooks pointed at a man filling up his car at a self-serve pump.

I turned to see what he was talking about and nearly ran off the road staring. The man pumping gas appeared perfectly normal if you glanced at him, but there was something about him that made him seem almost transparent, like a double-exposed picture.

"You see it, too?" I asked.

Brooks nodded. Then he pointed ahead. "There's another one!"

There was an attractive woman standing on a street corner, a pretty little girl of maybe four or five holding onto her hand. Both were wearing shorts, and the little girl's blonde hair matched her mother's in color. The strange thing was that while the little girl looked perfectly normal, her mother had that same transparent look. A ghost? No, the woman wasn't as transparent as that. It was as if I tried very hard, I could see through her. The little girl noticed nothing odd.

She even smiled at her mother.

"Maybe it's a trick of the light," I suggested.

Brooks took a long hard look at me. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

I glanced over at him and shook my head.

"So what do we do now?" I asked as I stopped for a red light. If we were smart, I thought, we'd just scoot right out of town and forget that we ever heard of Ovid, Oklahoma. But curiosity doesn't just kill cats. I

had worked with Brooks long enough to know that he was a curious person. So was I for that matter. But even curiosity has its limits. When surrounded by something as strange as Ovid, you tend to seek out the familiar.

"Where's that Ford dealer?" Brooks asked. It was the same place I would have sought.

"Well," I speculated, "it's a small town. I'd say it's either out here on this highway strip or it's downtown."

"Let's find out," Brooks said, pushing the rented car further into Ovid.

The Ford dealer wasn't on the highway. We went from one end to the other and found nothing but bars, fast food, motels and gas stations, plus a few other local businesses. That left downtown. We followed the signs directing us to the business district.

I couldn't speak for Brooks, but I was wondering if the transparent people weren't just the aftermath of the previous night's drinking. I saw a few other people, and they looked normal enough. In fact, the whole town looked normal. It looked like it ought to have one of those banners you used to see flying from a light post declaring the town to be an All-American City.

As we drove into the business district, I noticed not everyone had that transparent appearance. Frankly, most of them did, but not all. The interesting thing was that no one seemed to notice if the person he passed on the street had that aura of transparency. I saw a teenage couple holding hands - the boy was transparent and the girl not. It was the same with another mother and child. Only this time it was the mother who appeared solid.

I was about to suggest to Brooks that we drive out of town as quickly as we could when he called out, "There it is!"

There was a typical blue and white sign on the corner at the far end of the business district. "Forester Ford" it said. Behind it was a modest salesroom and a number of bays stretched out along the back of the building. The whole lot took up half of the block. In front, a row of

gleaming F-150 pickup trucks sat proudly, looking like rugged sentries protecting the colorful rows of Contours and Tauruses behind. It wasn't a huge store, but it was impressive for the apparent size of the town.

"When we get back to Dearborn, I'm going to have a long talk with the people who maintain our database," Brooks growled as he scanned our dealer list. "I've checked this three times and still can't find a listing for this place."

I pulled into a visitor's parking spot and watched with amusement as two salesmen jumped up from their desks in the showroom and raced each other to greet us as we got out of the car. The winner of the little contest to see who could wait on us smirked at his coworker, then turned back to us, his hand extended.

"Hi, welcome to Forester Ford," he said with practiced ease. "I'm Jim Carlsbad."

I took his hand in spite of the fact that Jim was one of the transparent people. So was the other salesman for that matter. I was surprised to feel Jim's hand. It was as solid as my own. "Allen Ripley," I said. Then with a nod at Brooks, "And this is Dan Brooks."

"Just call me Brooks," he said, reluctantly extending his own hand. I could tell from his expression that he had been as surprised as I had been to find the salesman's hand solid.

"So what can I do for you?"

I explained, "Brooks and I are with Ford out of Dearborn. Is Mr. Forester around?"

I could see the disappointment on the salesman's face. There might be something odd about his appearance, but he acted just like almost every other salesman I had met. His visions of a live prospect evaporated.

"We weren't expecting you," Jim said apologetically.

"Well, there was a little mix-up," I replied vaguely. "As long as we're here though, is Mr. Forester available?"

"What? Oh, yes...sorry. He's out in the service bay. Come on, I'll take you there."

I was impressed with Forester Ford. The showroom was immaculate and the cars displayed simply but effectively. The staff was neat and dressed more formally than I would have expected in a small town - coats and ties for the men and skirts and heels on the women. It was almost as if someone was getting ready to shoot a TV commercial there. It looked like the showrooms in our ads.

The Service Department smelled of oil, rubber and exhaust, as all auto service departments do, but it too was neat and clean. The mechanics moved about with the professional air of NASA technicians, their neatly pressed blue work shirts and pants a tribute to their professional demeanor. It was almost too good to be true. Hell, it really was too good to be true.

"This place looks like it's bucking for an award," Brooks muttered to me.

I agreed. Most dealerships didn't look this sharp even when they knew we were coming. Many dealers tried to impress us, but most fell short. We had seen the best and we had seen the worst. Forester Ford was impressing us without even trying. Oh sure, there was an oil spill here and there or something out of place, but lot boys seemed to be everywhere, cleaning up spills and replacing tools as fast as possible.

"So you boys are from the Home Office!" a booming voice called out. Brooks and I had been so busy admiring the service area that we hadn't noticed when Jim had left us to find the boss. We turned to see a large overweight man of perhaps forty-five. He wore a tasteful gray suit and sincere tie around his thick neck. His thinning blond hair was well-trimmed and the smile on his round face was friendly. If he hadn't had that unsettling air of transparency about him, he would have looked like any of a thousand Ford dealers around the country. "Bill Forester," he announced, extending a large hand.

With what I hoped was no hesitation, I took the proffered hand. It was as solid as I now expected it to be. Brooks followed suit.

"You boys should have let us know you were coming," Bill Forester told us. "We would have rolled out the red carpet for you."

It was a little bit of a joke. Ford's leasing program was known as a Red Carpet Lease, so we had heard it before. We chuckled anyway.

"So what are you two boys doing here?" he asked in a friendly tone. There was no suspicion in his voice - only curiosity.

Brooks scratched nervously at his moustache, an obvious sign that he expected me to come up with the answer. We had worked together so long that we knew each other's mannerisms by heart. I was up to the task. "We're making an unannounced tour of Ford stores in Oklahoma and Arkansas," I said glibly. I hoped my face wasn't red. I didn't want him to know how screwed up our database was.

He smiled. "Well, always happy to have folks from the Home Office show up. We don't get folks out here from Dearborn very often."

Well, I supposed since they weren't even in the database, that wasn't too surprising. I wondered how they even managed to get new cars in. Production had to be on a different database. When I got back home, I was going to have serious words with the people who maintained our data.

Bill Forester spent the rest of the morning showing us around. Brooks and I felt pretty honored by the attention. Usually we got shunted off to the care of some flunky while the dealer did more important things - like setting up his tee time. Bill seemed rightly proud of his operation though, and was anxious to personally show it off. By the time the tour was done, I had practically forgotten that most of the employees I had met had had that odd transparent quality.

"You don't suppose it was something in the drinks that caused us to see these people so funny, do you?" Brooks asked when we were alone for a few minutes. The look on his face indicated he didn't really believe that himself.

"I don't know" I admitted. "If you hadn't noticed it too, I might have written it off as some sort of trouble with my eyes. I mean, I can't really

see through them."

He nodded. "I know what you mean. If I don't think about it, they all look perfectly normal. Then, if I concentrate, it's as if I can see what's directly behind them - sort of like a double exposure."

We didn't get a chance to say more. Bill hurried back to join us. "You boys must be hungry. I'll tell you what - let's go get ourselves some burgers and talk about any training you want to do."

Bill promised us the best burgers in the state for lunch, and I have every reason to believe he made good on his promise. Rusty's Burger Barn wasn't fancy. It was one of those places with plastic upholstering on the booths and chairs and linoleum on the floors. In fact, it looked like something out of the past - the sort of places you went for a good burger before McDonald's sprung up everywhere. The neon sign in front declared "Rusty's Best Burgers". And they were the best.

"You want to bring me another choc malt, Michelle?" Bill called out to the cute waitress in the institutional pink dress.

"You bet, Bill," she called back, practically yelling in the ear of a customer sitting at the lunch counter. "How about your friends?"

"Nothing for me," Brooks groaned. "I'm stuffed."

"I'd take another Coke," I called back in what I hoped was as folksy a tone as Bill had used. After all, I had grown up in the Midwest myself. I could be folksy when I wanted to be.

"On its way," she called back.

When our drinks were delivered, we all settled back in the booth. Bill stared across at us with a big friendly grin. "So what do you think of our little operation?"

Talk during lunch had been confined to baseball and the weather. Now it was time to get down to business. "To be honest, Bill," I began, "you've got about the sharpest operation I've ever seen – especially for a small town like Ovid."

Bill grinned happily.

"I've got to level with you though," I went on. "There's a glitch in our database. We found you by accident."

Bill chuckled. "You aren't the first folks to tell me that."

"We aren't?" Brooks blurted out.

Bill shook his head. "Nope. It seems like mapmakers are always forgetting about us. You buy an atlas - one of those nice Gousha jobs - and we're not in there. It used to kind of bother us, but nowadays, we just think it's kind of funny."

"But doesn't the Chamber of Commerce get a little upset?" I asked.

"Not really," he answered.

Brooks and I waited for an explanation, but none was forthcoming. It wasn't as if Bill was being coy with us. Rather it was as if he saw nothing particularly unusual about a thriving town that simply wasn't on the map. It didn't make a lot of sense.

But then again, I was starting to notice a number of things about Ovid that didn't make sense. Ovid was almost too good to be true. Oh, it was normal I supposed, but it was somehow on the plus side of normal. Things were a little too good. For example, Bill's dealership was not run like a small town operation. Salespeople in small town operations wore open shirts and - often as not - wrinkled pants. Bill's salespeople wore neatly pressed sport coats and ties, and their shoes were shined as if they were going to a military inspection. The building was modest but it was spotless. The landscaping was a little greener than I might have expected so early in the spring. Come to think of it, Ovid seemed a little warmer and more pleasant than I would have expected on such an early spring day.

"Your service people don't look as if they need much from us," Brooks told Bill. "Frankly, they look as if they could teach what we have to give them all by themselves. Probably the best we could do is give them a little update on what's coming out this fall and a little look at future products."

"I should do the same for your sales force," I added.

Bill nodded, obviously pleased. "We'll set everybody down right after work today," he resolved. "You both don't mind if I invite somebody from the paper over, do you? This would be good press for us."

We agreed. There was nothing we had to say that was company confidential. The odd thing, I thought, was here was a man who wanted press attention and yet wasn't concerned that his town wasn't even on the map.

"Have you noticed something funny?" Brooks asked me as we waited in one of the offices while the staff prepared for our little talk.

I looked up from the notes I had been reviewing. Bill had given us the Sales Manager's office to work out of, so I had plenty of room to spread my notes all over his desk. "I've noticed a lot of funny somethings," I told him. "What did you have in mind?"

"There's something funny about Bill and most of the others," he began.

I nodded. "Yeah, we can almost see through them."

"So why aren't we worried about that?" Brooks asked.

"Worried?"

He leaned on the desk, facing me. "Yeah. Why didn't we just turn tail and run the first time we saw somebody who looked transparent?"

"But they're not really transparent," I argued. "It must just be the hangover or the heat in the car or..."

"It's not the hangover, pal," he interrupted. "You've had hangovers before and didn't start seeing through people. And as for the heat in the car, we aren't in the car now. Besides, this is the most comfortable day of any season I've ever spent in this damned state. Yet we aren't upset about all this."

"You're upset," I pointed out.

He shook his head. "Nope. I'm curious. There's a big difference. Something's going on here, and I think the company may have something to do with it."

"Ford has something to do with people being transparent?" I asked, my voice spilling into nervous laughter. "now where did you come up with that one?"

Brooks looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "There's a company here in town called Vulman Industries."

"I know" I told him. "I overheard the receptionist talking about it. Her husband works there. It's some kind of defense contractor."

"That it is. But did you know Vulman also makes parts for Ford?"

That I didn't know. Brooks correctly interpreted my silence. "So Ford knows all about Ovid, but they won't admit it."

"What do you mean they won't admit it?"

"I called up a friend of mine in Purchasing," he explained. "Vulman is a supplier for Ford. The company makes fuel pumps for some of our vehicles. But Purchasing says the company is in Tulsa."

"Maybe it is," I argued. "Maybe the headquarters are there and Ovid is just a manufacturing plant. You need to take it easy, buddy. The next thing you know you'll be telling me that there really is a face on Mars and the CIA put it there."

"I'm just saying we need to be careful," Brooks clarified. "Let's just do our presentation and get the hell out of town before sundown."

"You think they all turn into bats and drink blood after dark?" I teased, laughing.

To my surprise, Brooks didn't join me in my laughter. "I don't know what I think," he said ominously. "I just know what I know and I know there's something weird about Ovid."

Yes, there was, I admitted to myself. I returned to my notes and tried hard not to think about it.

The presentation went well. Of course it did. Bill's staff were model employees. Like everything else in the dealership, they were almost too good to be true. They listened attentively, asked just the right

questions - politely of course - and displayed remarkable intelligence. And there wasn't a solid person in the crowd. As I finished my presentation I was beginning to think that Ovid was a town populated by space aliens or something.

"Great job, guys," Bill said, patting us on the back as his employees drifted off to wherever seemingly transparent people went every evening. "Everybody really enjoyed it."

I nodded in agreement. The smiles had been genuine and the applause warm. I could see Brooks nodding, too.

"Now I've got you boys a couple of rooms over at the Ovid Inn for the evening," he went on.

"Oh, that's not necessary," I said, beating Brooks to the punch. "We'll just head out this evening and get back to Tulsa."

"Nonsense!" Bill said with a stage frown. "It'll be dark soon and some of these roads around here are a little tricky at night. You can get a good night's sleep and start out fresh in the morning. Try Nellie's Grill out on the highway for breakfast. She makes some fine biscuits."

Our next round of protests were weaker. To tell the truth, it had been a long day, and hangover days always seemed twice as long. I was tired and getting a little hungry again, and I had worked with Brooks long enough to know he was in the same boat. now part of me wanted to get out of Ovid quickly, but part of me wasn't looking forward to dark roads in my exhausted condition. Besides, maybe the locals really did turn into bats at night, and I sure didn't want to meet them on the road. Just joking.

The Ovid Inn wasn't exactly the Hilton, but it was pleasant enough. It was situated on the main highway through town, surrounded by gas stations, convenience stores, fast food joints, and a lesser motel or two. The lobby was clean but plain - probably a preview of the rest of the place. It consisted of a bulletin board with the names of local restaurants and attractions, a couple of cheap chairs that I thought at first were only folding chairs, and a reception desk sporting a pen, a

bell, and a name plate that read "Z Proctor, Proprietor."

Z Proctor was a slim man who appeared to be approaching his mid forties with little grace. His hair was graying and thinning at the same time, and his small bushy moustache added at least five years to his apparent age. "Folks call me Zee," he told us as we filled out the registration cards. "Been runnin' hostelries for... well, seems like forever."

"Uh-uh," I muttered, not really listening as I filled in the blanks on the registration card.

"Now if there's anything wrong with the bed, you let me know" he said with measured concern.

"Sure," I responded, picking up the key while thinking he was really a weird old duck. now why had I called him old? I was just a few years over thirty, and Brooks was closer to forty. Yet there was something about Zee that made him seem almost ancient.

"Looks like we're side by side," Brooks commented, looking at the numbers on the doors. "Want to clean up and see what kind of night life Ovid's got?"

I felt my head throb just a little. "How can you talk about partying after last night?"

"You ever hear of the hair of the dog that bit you?" he asked with a grin.

"Yeah, right," I groaned. "I'll tell you what - I'd settle for a burger and a beer. Give me a few minutes to clean up first."

This was not going to be a night of drinking and debauchery, I told myself as I washed my face and lathered it up to shave. Last night in Tulsa had been a near thing. We had been lucky we hadn't gotten ourselves in a nasty fight. If that big bouncer hadn't stepped in, we'd probably be in either jail or a hospital by now. Dearborn wouldn't look favorably on that at all. This was going to be a one beer night. Period.

I really liked Brooks. He and I had been traveling together for the better part of a year. Although I always suspected he had a private

side he never allowed me to see, we had become almost like brothers, seeing eye to eye as we did about so many things. We both had the same view of the world, and had our dislike of the Japanese extended to other races, we would probably have grabbed a couple of guns and headed for the northwest with the white supremacists. But we didn't really think that way. Blacks and even Mexicans were okay with us. But Orientals? Well, to be honest, we had both been raised to think of them as sneaky little foreign bastards. Don't like it? So sue me. Sue us.

But it was more than that that held the two of us together. We enjoyed the same things. We liked cars and hated our ex-wives. We liked women though, with Brooks preferring brunettes and I blondes - which meant we seldom went after the same girl. And we both liked to toss down a few brews.

The only difference was that Brooks could toss down a lot more than I could. Three or four beers and I was wasted. Brooks had twenty pounds on me though, and a seemingly unlimited capacity for beer. So far, that twenty pounds had stayed off his waist, but that was coming, I was sure. He undoubtedly had a long evening planned in a local watering hole. So okay, I'd have one with him while I ate and take the car back to the motel, leaving him to take a cab.

But could I really do that? I thought as I finished shaving. He had nearly gotten himself beaten up the night before. I didn't want him to get in any trouble. So okay, I'd stay with him, but I'd just nurse my beer. Or maybe I'd turn to (shudder) soda pop or something.

My thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. "You ready, Allen?"

"Coming."

We ended up at a place with the unlikely name of Randy Andy's. We had both expected a strip club, but were disappointed to find it was just a local tavern. It seemed like a popular joint though. The place consisted of two rooms. The first sported a long bar with typical bar stools padded in dark blue or black plastic - with the dim lighting I

couldn't tell which. There were few tables along the opposite wall, leaving a wide aisle in between. The second room was actually a little larger than the bar. It consisted of more tables uniformly arranged, some booths along the far wall, and a large pool table lit by a fancy pool table light advertising Coors Beer.

I can't say the joint was jumping, but business looked fairly good for a week night. A Shania Twain song was rocking along in the background, but not so loud as to mask the din of conversation or the clicking of pool balls. Brooks and I chose a table near the pool table determined to play a couple of games when the two would-be cowboys at the table finished their game.

Things started looking up when the waitress came swiveling over to us. She wasn't exactly beautiful, but she was damned attractive, her long dark hair and evenly tanned skin made her look as if she'd be more at home on a warm beach somewhere rather than a small town like Ovid. She wore a short white minidress that did little to disguise her full breasts and long trim legs, and the way she walked easily on her high heels was enough to make a married man leave home.

"What'll it be, guys?" she asked with a sultry voice.

"How are the burgers?" Brooks asked, his eyes resting on her cleavage.

"Good," she replied, watching Brooks with amusement. "Want one?"

"With cheese and whatever's on tap," Brooks responded. Then, "What's your name?"

"Sly," she said, not missing a beat. From the casual way she responded, I could see she was used to being hit on. I could also tell she was choosy about her men.

"I'm Brooks. What are you doing after you get off?"

So okay, it wasn't the best pickup line in the world, but I had seen it work for Brooks more than once. Not this time, though.

"Well, after my boyfriend picks me up, I thought I'd go home and see how my son was doing," she said blithely. Then she turned to me, a

mischievous twinkle in her eye, without giving Brooks another thought.

"I'll take the same," I said meekly.

"Damn!" Brooks muttered as she walked away. "I'd like to be her boyfriend. I'll bet she drains him dry every night."

I nodded in agreement. This was the way Brooks and I had spent many an evening on the road. We had become connoisseurs of barroom burgers and big-chested waitresses in a couple of dozen states. I suppose looking back on it that it wasn't much of a social life, but it seemed to satisfy us at the time.

"So what do you think?" he asked after Sly had delivered our drinks.

"About what?"

Brooks snorted. "About what? Look around here, Allen. We're sitting in the middle of a town that isn't on the map calling on a Ford dealer that isn't in our database surrounded by transparent people."

"They aren't really transparent," I pointed out. "They're - "

He waved away my comment with his hand. "I know - you can't really see through them. It's more like..."

His voice trailed off as Sly placed two platters heaped with a sizzling burger and a mountain of golden fries in front of us.

"You guys need anything else?"

I smiled. "We're doing fine."

Sly surprised us by hanging around to talk. The way she had rebuffed Brooks, I figured she'd give us a wide berth. "So what do you think of Ovid?"

"How do you know we're not from around here?" I asked, taking a sip of my beer.

She laughed at that. "Ovid is a small town. Everybody pretty much knows everybody. Besides, my boyfriend is a salesman at Forester Ford. He told me all about the two of you."

Brooks looked at me as he munched a bite of his burger. I could see

he was thinking the same thing I was. Sly seemed willing to talk, so maybe she could answer some of the questions we had.

"So how long have you been living in Ovid?" I asked casually.

Her answer was cryptic at best. With a shrug she told us, "I guess you could say I've kind of lived here all my life."

"Kind of?" I prompted.

"You'll find out what I mean eventually," she replied with a smile. "It's a little hard to explain though."

"It seems like a nice town," Brooks said laconically.

"Oh it is," she agreed. "It's like Disneyland." When she saw the confusion on our faces, she laughed again. "You know what they call Disneyland - 'the Happiest Place on Earth'. Well, I think maybe that could describe Ovid, too. Although you might not think so at first."

My God, I thought, we're talking with a crazy woman. What was she talking about? I wanted to ask her more, but my thoughts were interrupted by shrill feminine laughter.

Brooks and I looked up to see two young women - twins - walking into the room. They were not the most attractive women I had ever seen with their dull blonde hair and sharp features, but their identical short pink dresses showed very memorable figures. I could feel a little interest between my legs.

Sly looked over her shoulder. "Like them?"

I must have nodded without thinking about it.

"They're the Borland twins," she told us. "Jean and Tina. You want me to introduce you?"

And introduce us she did. Jean and Tina - I never could figure out which was which - were poster children for dumb blonde jokes. Between the two of them, they had about enough brainpower to be a low grade moron. But what they lacked in intelligence, they made up for in... other things.

So okay, taking to bed two ignorant farm girls who weren't smart enough to charge for their services might not be something to be proud of. I mean, I hardly felt as if I had proven my romantic prowess by bedding a girl who practically ripped my clothes off on the drive back to the motel. Those girls were bound and determined to get screwed that night - and probably every night for all I knew. Still, when you're a road warrior like Brooks and I, you take sex where you can find it.

"I feel like shit," Brooks mumbled over breakfast coffee. On Bill Forester's suggestion, we had hunkered down for breakfast the next morning at Nellie's Grill. The girls had left after they had drained us, leaving Bill and I to toast to our success with a bottle of bourbon Brooks kept at all times. We may have had a few too many, because morning came far too early.

We had checked out of the motel already and tried to reach Dearborn. Unfortunately there was something haywire with both our phones. "A cell must be out somewhere," Brooks muttered.

"Or a satellite," I suggested when he had tried again at Nellie's.

"That's okay," he sighed. "We've got open tickets, so we can either head off to where we were going yesterday or go back to Tulsa."

"I vote for Tulsa," I said. That was the good thing about our jobs. We planned our own routes and were left pretty much alone by headquarters, communicating mostly by phone or e-mail. "I'm ready to get out of Oklahoma and rest up for a few days."

Brooks nodded, his eyes so tired I thought his eyeballs might fall out. "Me, too. Tulsa it is."

At least Nellie's biscuits put us back together again. Or maybe it wasn't just the biscuits. We each had a big country breakfast with ham, bacon, eggs, and that Southern delicacy known as grits. Brooks ate my grits, too. I never could stomach those things.

"On the road again," Brooks muttered. Then he looked a little puzzled, as if there was some ritual he hadn't performed.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

"It's funny," he mused, "I couldn't find my cigarettes yesterday. Nobody seemed to have a light anyhow."

And the lighter in the car wasn't working, I noted to myself. I had tried it before we went to Randy Andy's and couldn't get it to light.

"Come to think of it," he continued, "I haven't had a cigarette since we got to Ovid. It's almost as if I didn't have the urge to smoke one."

"I know what you mean," I told him, suddenly uneasy. How could two men who had smoked since they were teens suddenly lose all desire for a cigarette? But I felt the same way. It was as if I had no urge to light up.

Brooks and I had worked together long enough that some things could go unsaid. He was thinking the same thing. What was it Sly had said? Something comparing Ovid to Disneyland... Oh yes - the Happiest Place on Earth. So did that mean the Happiest Place on Earth suppressed desires like smoking?

"And I haven't seen a single cigarette machine, have you?"

I shook my head. "Maybe selling cigarettes is against the rules around here."

"Whose rules?" he snorted. "I've bought cigarettes out in little tank towns in Utah. Utah, for God's sake! Even the Mormons sell cigarettes."

"I don't know the answer," I admitted, "but I think the sooner we get out of this town, the better I'll like it."

"Amen to that, brother."

It was Brooks' turn to drive. I was just as glad. The way my head felt, I didn't think I could concentrate on the road. As we started down the highway through town, I think we both had feelings of trepidation. There was something very wrong with Ovid - something not natural. And I kept thinking about some of the things Sly had said. She kept saying we'd find out things eventually, talking as if we wouldn't be

leaving Ovid any time real soon. Maybe she was telling us not that we wouldn't leave Ovid, but rather that we couldn't leave.

Well, I thought, she was wrong about that. The last outpost of Ovid, a tiny service station, was now behind us. Brooks put the pedal to the metal and...

My heart was somewhere around my back molars when I heard the sudden wail of a police siren.

"Oh shit!" Brooks muttered. I turned around to see what he had already seen in his mirror - a police car.

No one likes to see the flashing red and blue lights of a police car behind them, and Brooks was no exception, but there was something in his eyes that denoted more alarm than usual at the sight. I'm sure I had the same look in my eyes as well. My mind reeled back to a story I read in high school where a strange town - I think it was supposed to be in New England - barbecued speeders. Surely I didn't expect to be barbecued, but I had a strange premonition that the faceless cop just getting out of the police car wasn't just going to issue us a ticket.

The familiar mantra wasn't long in coming. "Step out of your vehicle please." The cop was tall and lean. He looked like he ran marathons to work up a light sweat. I couldn't see much of his face, though. In the brief time that he had leaned over to talk to Brooks, his eyes had been masked by a pair of mirrored sunglasses.

Brooks stepped out with a resigned sigh, carrying his driver's license and the rental agreement for the car with him. I slumped down in the seat of the car, making myself small. It didn't work though. The cop leaned over to address me as well, managing to keep an eye on Brooks as he did so.

"Step out of the car please."

My hand shaking, I opened the car door and slowly slid out of the car. The cop motioned with his head that I was to come around and stand next to Brooks. now I've watched a lot of cop shows, and I have to say that considering he had no backup, he didn't seem to be terribly

concerned about facing two men in the prime of their lives. Something told me he didn't have to worry about what we might do though.

"Do you know how fast you were going?" he asked Brooks, not bothering to look up from the license.

Brooks shrugged nervously. "I'm not sure. Fifty? Fifty-five?"

"Fifty two," the cop confirmed, then added, "In a twenty-five mile per hour zone."

"Twenty-five!" I blurted out. "But we're a mile out of town."

"Not really," the cop replied laconically. "City limits extend out a little beyond here. It's twenty-five to the city limits."

"It's a damned speed trap," I muttered while Brooks tried with a small head shake to quiet me down. Yeah, I was out of line, but I knew a speed trap when I saw one.

"Follow me to the City Hall," the cop told Brooks, ignoring my outburst.

"Officer, will this take long?" Brooks asked politely.

I thought I saw a thin smile cross the cop's lips. "Not long – not long at all."

"Damn you, Allen," Brooks growled as he pulled out behind the cop.

"Are you trying to get us thrown in jail?"

"Sorry," I said, meaning it. "He just pissed me off. I mean, we were a mile out of town - or at least a mile away from any buildings. He was waiting for us - or somebody like us. He knows damned good and well that strangers wouldn't know where the town speed limit ended."

"Well, there's no sense in bitching about it," Brooks told me as we re-entered Ovid. "Let's just hope we can run through this process quickly and get back on the road. Have you tried to call Dearborn again?"

"Just tried," I replied. "I still can't get anything on the phone."

"They probably think we've run off to join Toyota or something."

"Fat chance of that," I laughed.

We turned off the highway and headed toward the business district. A block west of the main drag, we came upon a gray granite building with impressive columns in front. The words "City Hall" were carved into the granite above the columns. As small town city halls went, it was a decent looking building with the Oklahoma flag flying next to the US flag in the grassy area in front of the building. Except for the state flag, it could have been the city hall of almost any small town in America.

We pulled in next to the cop in a part of the lot labeled "Police Business Only." The cop didn't even bother to turn around to see if we were following him. We were though, until he came to a stop at a desk at the entrance of the police department. The desk was manned by a very attractive black woman dressed in a police uniform. I could see the name Hazleton on her nametag.

"Good morning, Officer Mercer," she said primly. In spite of her formality with him, there was a friendly smile on her face.

"Good morning, Wanda," he replied in his deadpan voice. I thought though that I detected a little friendly warmth in his voice - just a little that is. "Book these two please while I see the Judge."

"Wait a minute!" I demanded. "What am I being booked for? I wasn't driving."

Officer Mercer just shrugged and walked away without answering me.

"You'll be booked pending charges," the black officer explained. "And you friend here will be booked for speeding."

Brooks and I looked at each other. Again, the unspoken communication between the two of us kicked in. The expression on Brooks' face said we were in deep doo-doo. I couldn't have agreed more.

"Look," the woman said, "the Judge will probably see you in just a few minutes. Just relax and stay calm. It will all be over in a few minutes."

Her words were meant to be comforting, but somehow they carried a warning in them. Part of my mind was telling me this was just another

small town speed trap. We'd just pay the fine and move on, sadder but wiser with a vow never to return to this strange little town. Part of my mind was telling me there was something else going on. Oh, I didn't really think we'd be barbecued or anything like that, but I had an odd premonition that my life - and Brooks' life - would soon change radically.

"You boys want some coffee?" Officer Hazleton asked as she strolled over to the coffee pot to pour herself a cup.

"Please," we both said in unison. Coffee might calm my nerves a little, I thought.

"Anything in it?"

"Black for both of us," Brooks volunteered.

The conversation was so mundane that it was practically surrealistic.

"Here you go, boys," she said, handing us each a cup.

The coffee was good, and it calmed my nerves enough to ask, "Officer Hazleton - "

"Call me Wanda."

"Wanda," I began again, "what's going on here?"

"Going on?"

"He means this town," Brooks said. "What's going on here? This town isn't on the map. There are people running around that you can almost see through - not you, but others. The Ford dealer here isn't in any Ford database. And now we get picked up for speeding - almost as if somebody doesn't want us leaving town."

If I was expecting her to look at us as if we had just lost a load of brain cells, I would have been surprised. Instead she just smiled and said, "It's sure a mystery, isn't it?"

"It sure is," I agreed.

"Well, just let me give you a little advice," she said as she leaned back on a desk and sipped at her own coffee. "When you see the Judge, be

respectful. If you're real careful, this will all come out a lot better than you think."

It was cryptic advice. If it wasn't for the color of her skin, she and Sly at the bar could have been sisters the way they talked in riddles. I didn't have time to ask her anything else though. Officer Mercer had returned.

"The Judge will see you now" he intoned, almost as if it was a mantra.

I now know how condemned prisoners feel. We were led down an institutional hallway toward the courtroom. I had this odd feeling that we weren't going to end up with just a fine and a strong admonition from the magistrate. It's funny how those feelings can hit you. There was no basis in fact for the feeling. By all rights, I should have expected a mundane court appearance. Maybe it was the day Brooks and I had spent in Ovid that gave me the feeling. If we had just been picked up sailing through town, we wouldn't know about the transparent residents and the women who spoke in riddles. We wouldn't have had a full day to let our imaginations get carried away. We wouldn't be wondering why we had lost the urge to smoke and why our phones didn't seem to work. We wouldn't both be as weak-kneed as we were when we were led into the well-appointed courtroom and directed to a table before an imposing bench.

An attractive brunette woman awaited us at the table. Her gray business suit and tailored jacket and skirt identified her as a lawyer. She turned as we approached, sparing a moment to smile at an attractive blonde woman in the gallery - the only spectator in the room - before turning to us.

"Susan Jager," she said, holding out her hand. I took it, surprised at how firm her handshake was. Most women never seemed to be able to manage a firm handshake. After Brooks and I had introduced ourselves, she explained, "I'm your court-appointed attorney for this case."

"Excuse me, ma'am," Brooks began, "but do we really need an attorney for a traffic case? I mean, I thought we'd just pay the fine and

move on."

"There are...special circumstances in this case," she replied. Great. Just what we needed - another woman who spoke in riddles.

"Look, Ms. Jager," I began in an exasperated tone, "we know there's something... different about Ovid. We need to know what the hell is going on here so we can deal with it. All we want is just to leave this town."

She favored me with a small smile. She was a very attractive woman when she smiled. "Well, Mr. Ripley, your appearance here today will go quite a ways toward telling you what's going on. As for leaving Ovid, that's another matter entirely." I started to tell her I was tired of answers that weren't really answers when she stopped me by continuing, "I know that isn't what you wanted to hear, But believe me, you two, the Judge is very upset about this case."

"Upset?" I asked. "Over a speeding charge?"

"No," she replied. "Over your recent conduct. He thinks you both have a lot to learn, and he plans to teach you. now if you're smart, you'll take my advice. Answer his questions honestly and completely - even if you don't think they have any bearing on your case. If you wise off or defend any unsuitable conduct, you'll find yourself in more trouble than you can handle. I know you don't understand why I'm saying this to you, but believe me, the rest of your life is in the balance."

It was a sobering lecture. She was right. I had no idea why she was telling us all of that, but I had a sneaky hunch it was good advice. Brooks looked equally serious. Neither of us said a word. Susan nodded at us and said, "Good, you're learning. Maybe there's some hope for you."

"All rise!" a voice called out. I turned to see Officer Mercer had entered the courtroom and was the acting bailiff. "The Municipal Court of the City of Ovid, Oklahoma, is now in session, the Honorable Judge presiding."

My knees trembling, I rose to my feet with Brooks and Susan flanking

me. I nearly passed out from relief when I saw the Judge. I don't know what I was expecting, but I was relieved at how... normal he looked. Imposing - but normal. He appeared to be middle aged - perhaps fifty or so - with dark hair had only a tiny hint of graying that was still to come. He had a neatly trimmed beard which was still dark but flecked with bits of gray giving him a rather distinguished look. He wore gold-rimmed glasses which somehow made him look more like a college professor than a magistrate. His black robe was impeccably neat and pressed as if he had taken it right out of the dry cleaner's bag.

It was then as I was just deciding that things were pretty normal after all that I realized Officer Mercer had not mentioned his name. Instead, he had simply called him "the Honorable Judge" as if that was sufficient. Well, chalk it up to one more oddity about Ovid, I told myself. With any luck at all, we'd pay a substantial fine but be allowed to leave town without further ado. Sure.

"Be seated," he intoned, taking his own seat at the bench. "First case."

"The City of Ovid versus Daniel Brooks and Allen Ripley," Officer Mercer declared formally.

The Judge looked down at a report set before him. He read it slowly, grunting occasionally. Then, looking at our attorney, he asked, "Ms. Jager, how will your clients plead?"

I suddenly realized she hadn't even bothered to ask us how we wanted to plead. For that matter, I didn't even know what I was charged with. now I knew how Alice must have felt when brought before the Red Queen. I wanted to jump up and protest, but I remembered what Susan had told us. What was going to happen was going to happen, and no lame protest from either Brooks or me was going to make it any better - and it just might make it worse.

"In the matter of speeding, guilty, Your Honor," she said. "In the additional matter, I have had the opportunity to review their files and find their conduct to be less than ideal but hardly reprehensible enough to warrant extreme measures."

What in God's name was she talking about? What conduct? What

extreme measures? This whole affair was taking a nasty turn, I told myself.

"Mr. Brooks!" the Judge boomed, causing Brooks to jump nervously to his feet.

"Yes, Your Honor?"

"Isn't it true that you were nearly involved in a fight in a bar two nights ago?"

Now how did he know about that?

"Uh...yes, Your Honor."

The Judge's eyes narrowed as he leaned forward. "And are you aware of what the out come of that fight should have been?"

"Should have been, Your Honor?"

The Judge didn't bother to speak. Instead he waived his hand and the entire courtroom suddenly disappeared. Somehow I was no longer sitting. Instead I was standing, a bottle of beer in my hand. Behind me, a Faith Hill song blared through loudspeakers. I gasped and was assailed by cigarette smoke - something I hadn't smelled since my arrival in Ovid. I looked around, realizing I was back in the bar in Tulsa that Brooks and I had gone to with Tony.

And yes, Tony and Brooks were both there. Tony looked just as he had before our near fight. Brooks on the other hand looked as startled as I. Then Brooks seemed to lurch to attention as he asked mechanically, "What's the action like here?" Then, as if forced, his hand reached out for a handful of pretzels.

This wasn't like the dream sequences you see on television. There were no echoing voices or people moving in slow motion. When I turned my head, I saw solid walls - not the out-of-focus stuff from some television director's attempts to be arty. This was real - or at least it felt real. Had the whole Ovid thing been some sort of a dream? Had I tripped out from too many nights of drinking and smoking into some sort of little pocket mental universe?

Tony was shrugging - just like before. "Not bad." He nodded at the same three girls sitting together at a nearby table. There they were again - a blonde, a brunette, and an Oriental girl. "Three of us - three of them. It looks like a plan."

Tony started to move, but I stopped him. I tried to stop myself first, but I couldn't. I was about to utter the same stupid comment that had started the whole altercation. "Wait a minute, Tony. Who gets stuck with the Jap?" There it was. It came out of my lips even as I tried to stop it. It was as if I was nothing more than a passenger in my own body.

It's funny, but although I had never liked Orientals – particularly Japanese - the comment I had just made sounded... stupid. At the time I had originally made it, it had seemed like a perfectly logical comment. After all, I knew some guys who didn't like, for example, redheads. If the third girl had been a redhead, one of those guys might have said, "Who gets stuck with the redhead?" now though, there was something wrong with the remark. I parsed it in my mind in that moment between my comment and Tony's response. Stuck. That was a bad word to use. It implied the Oriental girl was inferior goods. Jap. Well, okay. A lot of my ancestry was Irish. What would I have thought if someone had called me a Mick? Like I said, in retrospect, the comment sounded stupid.

Tony's brow furrowed. "Jap? Oh... you mean Jodie. She's not Japanese - she's Chinese."

Brooks snorted, "See? She's a Chink - not a Jap."

Please, Brooks, I thought to myself. Let up. I know I started this, but it'll just get worse if you don't shut up. But I knew he had the same problem I did. The Brooks inside the one I saw had been standing next to me in an Ovid courtroom only moments before. He, too, had been sent back to relive this time. But why?

"Yeah," Tony said. There was that unpleasant note in his voice again. "Jodie Chang. She works for the Pontiac store next to us. What's the problem?"

"No problem," I told him. Please, somebody back down this time, I thought to myself. I had a premonition that we hadn't just been sent back to relive this moment. Something different was about to happen. "You know how it is, Tony. We work out of Dearborn. Japs – uh, Japanese aren't too popular back there in the auto community."

"Yeah," Tony mumbled. "And those guys in Dearborn can all go piss up a rope. My brother's married to a Japanese girl. She's good folks."

"Yeah, right." There was Brooks right on cue.

This time, I watched Tony rather than waiting for Brooks to deliver his next line. If Brooks hadn't been so drunk the first time around, he might have seen the intense anger in Tony's eyes. He might have held back on his next comment if he had noticed Tony clenching his fist.

"Japs, Chinks, Nips, Slant-eyes, Gooks, it's all the same," Brooks commented with that evil little grin. "All the slant eyes in the world aren't worth one American job and you know it!"

"Okay, big mouth!" Tony yelled just like before and lunged for Brooks.

I was again in no position to stop him. I had been leaning back against the bar before and was again.

I was waiting for the big blonde guy again - the bouncer. What was his name? Oh yeah - Apollo. I was waiting for him to make his move just as he has before. I could see him standing across the room, but to my consternation, he wasn't coming toward us.

I felt sorry for Brooks as I saw Tony's punch coming toward him. That big ham hock at the end of Tony's arm would do serious rearrangement to Brooks' jaw. And I was sure Brooks was remembering what had happened before as well, or maybe he just didn't have the ability to move. In any case, he was doing nothing to defend himself. He wouldn't be prepared for the blow. I had to do something to help my friend.

"Tony!" I yelled jumping into his fist. I hadn't exactly meant to do that. I was trying to hold his arm back but I had miscalculated the arc of his swing. As I've pointed out before, I was never much of a fighter.

Tony's fist caught me high on my arm, sending a sharp pain through my whole shoulder.

Then I saw Brooks jump Tony, yelling something about laying off his friend. It all went downhill from there. I could see Tony's face, red with anger. I could see a couple of other guys - presumably friends of Tony's - enter the fray. Punches were thrown and bodies were flying when I heard several loud pops. At first, I thought it was something in the sound system, but then I realized it was coming from the gaggle of men we were fighting.

I felt a sudden sting in my chest. Something told me I didn't really want to know what it was, but I had to know. I looked down and watched in fascinated horror as a red blotch spread over my shirt. I took a breath - or at least I tried to. I suddenly felt light headed and tried to steady myself on the bar, but I nearly tripped over something. Looking down, I realized I had nearly tripped on Brooks. He was lying on the floor, a pool of red seeping out from under his prone body. I felt myself falling, and then...

...I was standing before the Judge. I looked to my right and nearly giggled with relief as I saw Brooks standing there, ashen-faced. I looked down at myself. There was no bloodstain. I sucked in a deep breath, reveling in the fact that I could still breathe at all.

"What... what..." I managed to gasp.

The Judge knew what I was trying to say. "What happened? You have just had the opportunity to see what would have happened had Apollo not intervened. You chose a very popular man to pick a fight with."

I wanted to tell him we weren't picking a fight, but I realized in that moment that it would have been a lie. We had indeed provoked the man, teasing him without realizing how deep his convictions were.

"He had friends," the Judge continued. "And one of those friends had a gun. Alcohol, bigotry, and guns - I can't think of a better formula for disaster, can you?"

We couldn't speak. It wasn't that we were being restrained from

speaking. We could just not think of anything to say in our own defense.

"And the spark that lit the fire was pure mindless bigotry," he went on in a most menacing tone.

"Uh... Your Honor," I said nervously, "we - Brooks and I - we aren't bigots."

"Oh of course you're not," the Judge replied in a disgusted tone. "You don't mind blacks or Jews or anything like that. You just don't like Orientals - particularly Japanese. Selective bigotry is no less bigotry. And close your mouth. Don't start telling me about what they did at Pearl Harbor. What they did then was no better or worse than any other nation at war. And they certainly paid for their mistakes on dozens of islands in the Pacific, not to mention at Hiroshima."

He continued to glare at us as our attorney slowly rose to her feet. "Your Honor, before you pass judgement, I would like to say something."

"Choose your words carefully," he warned.

Susan nodded, then continued, "While there is no doubt that you have in the past handed down deservedly harsh sentences to bigoted individuals, such as those two clansmen who came through town last month, I would submit to you that these men have committed no crimes of bigotry of that magnitude."

Reluctantly the Judge nodded. Susan took that as permission to continue.

"I would submit that there may be a better solution in this case – one which would be of benefit to the town."

The Judge leaned forward. "Do you have a specific solution in mind?"

She shook her head. "No Your Honor. I would leave that up to you. My clients would like to throw themselves on the mercy of the court."

I nearly shook my own head. I never thought I would hear that phrase actually used. I was just glad she had said it, though. The whole

scenario was so unreal - but I knew it was real. And I knew that the Judge was no ordinary magistrate. He was... something else – something I could never have imagined existed until I fell under his power. Now something was going to happen - something unimaginable.

The Judge was silent for a moment, staring first at our attorney, then shifting his gaze to Brooks and me. Brooks seemed to understand the same thing I did - that we were in deep, deep trouble, and that the next few moments would have a profound effect on the rest of our lives. I suspect that Brooks, like me, had no idea of how profound an effect it would be.

"Very well," the Judge said at last. The relieved sagging of Susan's shoulders told me we had just dodged a bullet. No - not a bullet; more like an artillery shell. "Mr. Brooks and Mr. Ripley, you are hereby found guilty."

Of what? I wondered. Were we guilty of a traffic violation or bigotry? It didn't seem to be a good time to ask, though.

"However," he continued, "on pleas of your counsel, I have decided to be lenient. However I must warn you that your sentence is in a manner of speaking a form of probation. Should you violate this probation in any manner, you will find yourselves dealt with more harshly. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Your Honor," we said in unison, as respectfully as we could.

I expected sentence to be passed upon us, and considering what happened, that was what he did. However I didn't realize it at the time. I watched in surprise as the Judge closed his eyes and began to speak in a language that sounded like Latin. Whatever language it was, its inflections were unlike any Latin I had ever heard spoken before.

I didn't have much time to speculate on it though. As he spoke, there was a strange feeling washing over me, almost as if every part of my body - inside and out - had begun to tingle. It was almost like the feeling I once had when I had touched the pole of a battery while in a

Ford training session, sending an electric current throughout my body. It caused me to gasp, and at the same time I heard Brooks gasp as well.

The Judge's eyes opened and his steel-blue eyes bored into us. "As you leave this courtroom today, be aware that there are many forms of prejudice and bigotry. In spite of what some people think, no one is immune from being bigoted. But continue your bigotry at your own peril."

I don't even remember leaving the courtroom. I think we thanked Susan for her help, turned and left without a look back, but I'm not certain. My next coherent memory was standing outside the courtroom with Brooks watching as a white Honda Odyssey van pulled up into the parking space in front of us. The engine stayed on, and I remember looking into the tinted glass to see the driver. He was a man of about medium height with short hair and was wearing sunglasses. For some reason, I walked to the van, opening the passenger door behind the driver and wordlessly stepped inside, feeling a little odd – almost smaller - as I did so.

Looking to my right, I saw for the first time that there was another passenger in the seat. He was an Oriental boy of perhaps thirteen or fourteen, wearing a San Francisco Forty-Niners T-shirt and denim shorts. He was one of the semi-transparent people. He seemed engrossed in a book; he hadn't even noticed my presence.

The driver - another semi-transparent person - seemed oblivious as well, not speaking or shifting his head as... someone stepped in the vehicle next to him. I had expected it to be Brooks, but it wasn't. It was an Oriental woman, dressed in shorts and an aqua tank top. She had long, nearly black hair hanging down her back, and she moved with feminine grace. Her face, while pretty, wore a look of near panic as she numbly belted herself in. She looked back at me with pleading eyes, causing me to look down at what she was seeing.

Oh God.

I looked down in horror. I was wearing a white tank top very similar in

style to the one the woman wore. But there were no mature breasts jutting out from it - yet. That was subject to change, however. I could feel the skin beneath the top swelling, filling the cups of a bra I now sensed there. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't take my eyes away as breasts began to form. Please, I begged silently in hopes that whatever agency was doing this could hear me, don't let them grow any larger. I was almost giddy when they stopped short of the woman's breasts. My relief was short lived though, as I watched my pants had become short denim shorts exposing legs that were slim, golden and hairless - and undeniably feminine. I could feel myself flush as I noticed the red nails on my small toes, peeking through feminine sandals.

I was finally able to move a hand to touch the breasts. I wasn't surprised to find the hand slender and feminine, with longish red nails at the ends of the small, slim fingers.

"This is City Hall," the driver's voice said suddenly. As the driver turned, I realized that he too, was Oriental. Undoubtedly I was too, I suddenly thought.

"Rachel, you'll get your driver's license here and Trish will have to come down here to get her Oklahoma learner's permit."

My mind was working overtime. In an instant, I realized that the driver had no idea there was anything out of sorts. So, I was Trish - or at least he thought I was. To make matters worse, I was now too young to even have a driver's license. But I could get a learner's permit. That made me probably fifteen, which was something of a relief. From my perspective, my changed body had looked almost small enough to belong to a child of no more than twelve or so.

"Now I imagine you're both anxious to see the new house your mother and I found for us," the driver said cheerily.

Mother?

Wait a minute - where was Brooks? I looked again at the Oriental woman while she looked back at me. "Brooks?" I mouthed silently. I was rewarded with a nervous nod of her head.

If someone had asked me what I would do if ever faced with such an incredible situation, I would probably tell them I would be screaming bloody murder. I would say that I would hop out of the van and go back to the Judge, demanding that he change me back into my real self. Yes, that's what I would have said my actions would have been. They weren't though. Instead, finding myself sitting in the van, obviously changed into a young Oriental girl, I did nothing at all. I sat meekly looking at the woman who had been Brooks hoping maybe he - she - would make the first move. But she didn't She just sat there in shock just like me.

Our driver - who obviously thought himself to be my father and the woman's husband - prattled on about what a great little town Ovid was and how we would all be very happy here. "I know you'll miss the Bay Area," he said cheerfully, "but you'll like Ovid. It's a friendly little town. There's practically no crime. And we were able to get a much nicer house here than we had in California - for less money!"

I wasn't really listening all that closely. Instead I was looking out the window of the van trying to make some sense of what was happening to me. Little more than a day ago, I had never heard of Ovid. now it appeared I was doomed to become one of its residents. Was that why some of the population of Ovid seemed a little transparent while others weren't? Were the ones like Brooks and me the prisoners and the transparent ones the jailers? No, that didn't make any sense either. The jailers were beings like the Judge and maybe that Officer Mercer.

But what about people like Susan, our attorney? She seemed content with her lot in Ovid, but she lacked the arrogance of a Judge or the self righteousness of Officer Mercer. Extending the jail analogy one step further, maybe she was like a trustee.

So how had we fallen under Ovid's spell? It must have happened as a result of the near barroom brawl. Maybe a brush with death was all that was needed to remand us to the custody of Ovid. Our lives were then forfeit. Perhaps we really had died in that bar and Ovid was some sort of strange afterlife. If so, it was a hell.

It was bad enough that I found myself in the body of a girl, but an Oriental girl made it all the worse. So what was I? Chinese? Korean? Worse yet - Japanese? I sighed. I supposed I would find out soon enough. Whatever I was, I had no doubt that I was stuck this way for as long as the Judge wanted me here. It would do me no good to rant and rave. I'd just have to do what Brooks appeared to be doing – sit back and take it.

In minutes, we had turned onto a quiet residential street. The houses, while hardly palatial, were nice semi-custom homes, most with two floors and plenty of brick trim. None looked brand new, as if the neighborhood had been built slowly over time. Judging from the size of the trees and shrubs, the oldest homes were perhaps ten years old while the newer ones were only a couple of years old.

We pulled into the driveway of a particularly nice one, freshly painted with blossoming trees in the front yard.

"Well, what do you think?" our driver asked.

The boy who I assumed was now my brother looked up from his book long enough to grunt noncommittally. The woman who had been Brooks remained silent with a forced smile on her pretty face. I suddenly realized they were all waiting for me to say something.

"Come on, Trish," the driver urged. "What do you think?"

"It's... nice," I managed to say rather stupidly.

It seemed to be enough though. He opened his door, calling out to me, "If you think it's nice now just wait until you see your room."

Oh I could just hardly wait.

I got out of the van, feeling for the first time all the sensations girls grow up knowing. My breasts shifted as I did and my hips felt a mile wide. Long hair blew in my face in the light breeze and my bare legs, denuded of any hair felt a chill. And although I had not been a huge man, I felt absolutely minuscule. Judging from the approximate height of the van, I was now no more than an inch or two over five feet. As he walked around to my side of the van, I could see that the boy who was

now my apparent brother topped me by a couple of inches. Shit! I was practically a fucking midget!

It made me feel perversely better to see that Brooks was not a whole lot taller than I was. The woman he had become was no more than five-four or so if that. And our driver - dear old "dad" - was only about five-eight or so. Terrific. We were a stereotypical short Oriental family. The next thing I knew I would be bowing and saying "Ah-so!"

On the plus side - if there was one - the house was the nicest one I had ever had the opportunity to live in. When my father lost his job, we had been living in a much more modest ranch house that we were barely able to hang onto with mother's smaller salary. Then, when I had married, I had moved into my wife's apartment. After the divorce, I had gotten a smaller apartment where I had lived ever since. As much as I traveled, I hadn't needed much of a place.

Now though, I was about to live in the American Dream. There was no furniture yet, but drapes were an indication that someone had lived here before us. Thick carpets and hardwood hallways greeted my eyes, and up the stairs, I could see doors leading to what appeared to be four large bedrooms.

"You'll get the bedroom on the right down the hall," my "father" told me. "It's the biggest one next to ours."

"Why does she get the big room?" the boy whined speaking for the first time since I had seen him.

"Because girls need more room," my new father said with an indulgent smile at me. "You know that, Ralph. Trish had the bigger room in California, too."

"Just because she's a dumb girl..." Ralph muttered, his voice trailing off. Great. Just what I needed - an obnoxious little brother. What else could go wrong?

Some day, I thought, I'll learn not to ask that question, for the next thing my "father" said was, "We need to get over to the high school today, too. That way, you two kids can get back into school right

away."

Back into school? Oh my God, he said high school. Been there – done that. But there could be no convincing him of that. I was a girl - probably a sophomore or junior - who would be expected to go to high school.

"Come on, Ralph," my surrogate father said with a grin. "Let me show you your room. Your mom can show Trish her room."

Dutifully, Brooks and I walked down to my assigned room. Safely inside the sunny room, Brooks closed the door. "Allen, that is you, right?" Her voice was soft and feminine - nothing like the raspy cigarette voice of Brooks.

"It's me," I replied, almost feeling tears well up in my eyes, so happy was I to be called by my true name. "What's happened to us?"

"I guess that Judge is some sort of magician," Brooks offered.

"Magician!" I sneered. "Magicians saw people in half and pull rabbits out of hats. Look at me! Look at us! Look at this whole town! Magician?"

She nodded. "Okay, whatever. We can discuss that later. Right now we have to figure out what to do."

"There's not much we can do," I sighed. "We're going to have to play along until we can get back in to see that Judge and make him change us back."

Brooks suddenly looked frightened. "Face him again? I don't know about you, pal, but I'm not sure that's such a good idea. He was pretty pissed at us before. He might do something even worse to us if we bother him."

"Worse?" I spat, indicating my feminine curves with a wave of my hands. "How much worse than this can it get?"

"A lot, I suspect," Brooks shot back.

"Oh sure," I growled - or tried to growl. In this body, it was more of a purr. "You at least get to be an adult. I have to go back to high school."

High school for God sakes, Brooks. As a girl!"

"So? You think I've got it any better? Sure, I'm an adult, but I'm a married adult woman. You at least get some time to get used to the idea before... before..."

Oh shit. I saw her point. What was it going to be like for her when dear old dad decided it was time to play hide the sausage? She could hardly say demurely that she wasn't that kind of girl. Two kids that were supposedly hers were a pretty good indication that she had played in the hay before.

"Oh God, Brooks, I'm sorry," I said, fighting back a sudden urge to go over and hug her. "I didn't think about that."

There were tears in her eyes. She tried to give me a brave smile, though. "That's all right. I'll figure out something. For now though, we've got to fake it. I'm going to have to pretend to be a wife and mother and you're going to have to pretend to be my daughter. Otherwise we'll just make things worse. I think what's happened here is that your 'father' has gotten himself a new job here in Ovid. The rest of the "family" doesn't want to be here."

"I don't need to fake that," I snorted. "I really don't want to be here - particularly like this."

"Stuff it, Allen. Our menfolk could be back any minute."

"Okay." Since there was no furniture to sit on, I plopped down on the floor. "Give it to me straight, 'Mom.'"

She ignored the comment. "Let's just try to act normal. I'm... what was that he called me?"

"Rachel."

She nodded. "Rachel. Mom to you. But what's our last name?"

"It's probably in your wallet."

She looked back at her feminine ass. "Damn! I guess I have a purse out in the car. I'm going to have to get used to carrying one. You, too - Trish."

I winced at the new name.

"So that's all settled," my new father said, bursting into the room with Ralph. Ralph looked reasonably happy, so apparently he found his room acceptable.

"Let's go get some lunch and get you two registered for school," 'Dad' said with a smile.

For the second day in a row, I ate at Rusty's Burger Barn, only this time it was as Patricia Sue Yamamoto. Yes, that was my new name. I had discovered it when I looked in my own purse back in the car. There it was on my California learner's permit. I was fifteen - closing in on sixteen at the first of the summer - and the picture showed an attractive Oriental girl with a friendly smile. Or I guess I should say she was attractive if you like Oriental girls.

"Dad" and Ralph scarfed down the burgers and fries as if they hadn't eaten in a week. Then they washed them down with thick malts. I had taken my cue from Brooks, who had ordered a small sandwich - no fries - and a Diet Pepsi. She seemed to know what she was doing, and to be honest, I was upset enough over my transformation to have only a limited appetite. The result: I couldn't even eat all of the smaller burger. Of course, I had a lot smaller body to keep fueled than I had had the previous day at Rusty's.

The next stop was Ovid High School. I felt as if I was being sent to prison as we walked into the building. Don't get me wrong. I liked high school when I was a teenage boy. I was active in sports and reasonably popular with the girls. But that was as a boy. I remembered when I was in high school how the girls were treated and how they treated each other. They were cliquish, boy crazy, and very concerned about things like hair and makeup. Now I would be expected to act that way, wouldn't I?

Fortunately we walked into the office while classes were in session. I say "fortunately" because the few students who were in the halls were looking at the four of us as if we had just landed from another planet. What was their problem? Then I realized that small towns in the

Midwest didn't have much of an Oriental population. As far as they were concerned, we really were from another planet.

A friendly if somewhat transparent secretary got us registered for school. She kept looking to Brooks for answers regarding what level of classes we should be in. I guess mothers are expected to know those things. A combination of our transcripts which had been sent to the school and some great bluffing on the part of Brooks got us through the meeting. In fact, I marveled at how well Brooks was taking this whole situation. I was quaking in my shoes and she was calmly playing her part as if born to it. Apparently I was a sophomore. That was a little bit of a break. That would give me a little status around the school - and it meant one less year I would have to repeat if Brooks and I were unable to figure out a way out of this mess. God, what a thought!

"Okay," my new dad said with his ever-present smile. "now that we have that out of the way, I need to go out to Vulman and get a look at my office. I'll get all of you checked into the motel first."

"But I want to go with you!" Ralph whined. "Mom and Trish will just be doing girl stuff."

The only girl stuff I wanted to do at that moment was to stuff my "little brother" in the nearest trash can. He was going to be the bane of my new existence.

"Dad" agreed. After getting us checked in, he took Ralph and left Brooks and me alone in the room.

"Did you see the way that Procter guy in the motel office looked at us?" Brooks asked as soon as we were alone.

"No," I admitted. I was already starting to become uncomfortable with the way men were looking at me. I had tried to ignore the innkeeper entirely.

"He knows who we are," Brooks said a little fearfully. "He's one of them."

"One of who?" I asked, plopping down on one of the two queen-sized

beds.

Brooks looked out the window, as if to see if we were being watched. "One of the ones like the Judge. The town must be full of them."

"How do you know that?" I asked, laughing for the first time since my change. "Feminine intuition?"

"Maybe," Brooks allowed to my surprise. "Who knows what I picked up with this body."

I leaned forward as Brooks sat down on the bed next to me. "How are we going to get through this?"

She shrugged. "The same way everybody else does - one day at a time."

"I know" I replied, "but I mean how are we going to convince everyone that we're really girls? I don't even know how to get this damned bra off - let alone dress and act like a girl."

"I'll help you," she said, surprising me again.

"You?" My eyes narrowed. "You weren't some kind of a transvestite, were you?"

"No!" she laughed, but her face was flushed. It was a natural, feminine laugh that I found both comforting and unsettling at the same time. "I was just raised with three older sisters. I was the only boy. I learned more about women and women's clothing just growing up around them than I did in five years of marriage."

I saw his point. I had grown up with two brothers, and my brief marriage had been a real eye opener for me as far as women's apparel and grooming had been concerned. To make matters worse, my wife had been rather modest, preferring not to talk about many things she considered too personal. I began to realize I had no idea how to act like a girl. Hell, I had even been too timid to go to the bathroom, knowing it would mean exposing my new genitals.

"What's wrong?" Brooks asked, noting the strained look on my face.

"I just realized I have to go to the bathroom," I replied, surprised at

how insistent the urge was.

"Then go?"

"Like this?"

Brooks sighed. "If you're waiting for you penis to grow back so you can stand up to go, you may have a long wait."

"Very funny," I muttered, but it was enough to get me to stand and head for the bathroom.

"And don't forget to wipe!"

"Yeah, yeah," I grumbled, slamming the door.

I was actually a little proud of myself when I finished. It hadn't been nearly as bad as I had thought it would be. And I felt a lot more comfortable.

"Did you wipe?" Brooks asked, not bothering to look up at me. She had been hanging up clothes from our suitcases in the small closet.

"Yes, Mother," I replied as sarcastically as I could.

Instead of getting mad, Brooks looked at me with a smile. "You sound just like my sister, Mary."

That wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear.

"Help me put things in drawers," she said, going back to her work.

"Why?" I asked. Like most men, I had always literally lived out of a suitcase, not bothering to put things in drawers. I was always more concerned about leaving things behind than I was about putting them in their proper place. Brooks had always been the same way. The "why" was more a question of why the change rather than why put things in the drawer.

Brooks didn't seem to notice, though. "It keeps things neater," she explained. "I sort of think it's expected of us."

This was getting spooky. "What do you mean by that?"

She stopped and looked at me. "While you were in the bathroom, I just

decided to relax and let my mind wander. The next thing I knew, I was doing this - just the way my mother used to do when we'd go on a trip. I think it may be part of the transformation spell. When we don't think about it, we just act natural."

"Like natural females you mean."

"Have you looked at yourself lately?"

Actually, I had. I had spent a few minutes looking at my new face and body in the bathroom mirror. What I saw was a cosmic joke. I had grown up hearing about 'those sneaky Japs.' now I was one - and a female one at that. Oh, I was cute. I might not have liked the Japanese, but I could appreciate feminine beauty no matter what the race. Of course, I had all the expected Oriental features. My skin had a nearly golden quality, but not exactly yellow. It was more like a warm tan. I had practically no body hair on my arms and legs. Of course I had felt some hair down below when I had wiped, and the hair on my head was a luxurious mane of ebony. My eyes had the typical Oriental "slant" to them - which of course wasn't really a slant at all, but rather the way bones and skin shaped the eyes.

I hadn't bothered to remove my top, but I could see that my breasts while not huge were well proportioned, and my waist was small without looking too thin. As for my hips... well, let's just say they were the hips of a girl. I knew I'd never walk again without feeling them moving with a girlish swing. Given my short stature, I was certainly... well, petite.

"Well, have you looked at yourself?" Brooks asked again.

"I thought it was a rhetorical question," I returned.

"Well, it wasn't. It's time you realized you really aren't the man you used to be."

"I realize that," I said with a sigh, returning to the bed. "But you sound as if you're a lot more resigned to it than I am."

"Don't let this act fool you," she said, sitting back down on the bed. I suddenly realized how much alike we appeared. She was just an older

version of me. "I want to get back to my life as much as you do. But it isn't going to happen right now. We've got to come up with a plan.

I figure by Monday -"

"Monday!" I screamed. "It's only Thursday. That means being like... like this for four whole days."

"At least," she agreed. "But tomorrow, your 'father' will be taking the day off to be with me while the movers get us into the house. Then the courts will be closed on the weekend, I would think. That makes Monday the first day I can pull you out of school over the lunch hour and try to see the Judge.

"Maybe our attorney can help," I suggested.

"Good idea!" Brooks said cheerfully. "I'll try to get away tomorrow and call her."

So I felt a little better after that. We had a plan. It wouldn't be so hard to play the girl for a few days. Of course, I'd have to go to school and be seen as a girl - a Japanese one at that - but then Monday, we'd see the Judge. Maybe he would accept our apologies and let us continue our real lives.

Dear old Dad got back a short time later with Ralph in tow. "So," he asked, "did you girls have a good time without the men around?"

I almost cringed at the question, but Brooks coolly replied, "Oh yes. We just had a nice girl talk."

I hoped she didn't see me cringe again. How could she be taking this so calmly? I wondered. Maybe it was because although suddenly finding herself female, she was still an adult. As a teenage girl, I would find it very hard to get anyone to take me seriously. I'd be expected to act like a teenage girl and think with my emotions. To make matters worse, I was short and cute, so who in the world would take me seriously even as I got older? And then there was the fact that I was Japanese...

"One of the guys at work told me about a great steakhouse here in town called Winston's. I thought after the movers leave tomorrow, we'd

go there - you know get dressed up and celebrate."

Oh, that was just what I wanted - to get dressed up in a dress and heels and go eat a petit filet while stopping every few minutes to freshen my lipstick. Please, "Mom", tell him to settle for burgers on the grill. Of course, I'd be exposing my smooth legs in jeans shorts just like now but at least nobody outside my "family" would see me.

"That sounds wonderful...dear," Brooks said to my disgust. Why had she called him "dear"? Then I realized the hesitation had come because she didn't even know his name. Great. Here she was - married to a guy whose name she didn't even know. At least I could get by with calling him "Dad", but if he called me something like "princess", I'd have to kill him.

We both managed to make it through the evening without too much trouble. For dinner, we selected a little place in downtown Ovid called The Greenhouse. It was a pleasant little place, and the chef's salad that had for some reason sounded good to me was excellent. The only problem with the place was that I noticed people staring at us. Oh, I had noticed it at lunch, too, but it seemed as if people had been more rushed at lunch, favoring us only with a curious glance. Dinner was a more leisurely meal though, and Ovid's citizens - both solid and not-so-solid - seemed to have more time to rudely stare.

Maybe I was just being oversensitive, I thought. Maybe they just noticed strangers since the town was so small. But maybe - just maybe - it was the fact that we were Oriental that caused them to stare. How many of them thought as I always had - that the Japanese had no business here? And how many were just curious?

I think I began for the first time to realize that I had been made into someone who was different. What I mean to say is that if I had been changed into a white girl, I would have been noticed for being attractive, but not different. There were plenty of attractive white girls in Ovid, I was sure. But I hadn't seen any other Orientals. That made me and my new family by definition different. It wasn't a pleasant feeling.

Thankfully dinner ended and our time on public display was over for the evening. I think we all noticed it. It wasn't as if people were hostile, but it made us all feel uncomfortable. Brooks had been in the same boat with me, but "Dad" and Ralph apparently had no inkling of any other existence - if they had ever had one. I had begun to think of them as real people in spite of the transparent aspect. It wasn't as if I could actually see through them anyway, so they were very real to me. Whatever their origins compared to ours, they were also a little unsettled by the attention we had garnered.

Strangely enough though, we didn't talk about it. Brooks and I were at a disadvantage since we had only been who we now were for a few hours. I think Ralph was a little young to have picked up on how much attention was paid to us. As for "Dad", he looked uncomfortable but had said nothing. I could understand that. More than likely, it was his decision to come to Ovid - or so he believed. That meant he would want the rest of us to feel comfortable in our new home. He would scarcely want to point out to us that we were potentially the subject of prejudice.

I slipped into bed quickly so as not to be seen very long in the short pink and white gingham pajamas I had been forced to wear. It had taken me an ungodly amount of time to get ready for bed, but I had discovered something in the process. By just relaxing and going with the flow, my body seemed to know just what to do, washing off the day's makeup, removing the earrings from my ears, and wiping after peeing. It was a trick I'd have to remember in the morning. Brooks took an equal amount of time before crawling into bed next to me, but Ralph and his father spent only moments getting ready for bed.

Once the lights were off and everyone had settled down for the night, I reflected how much my life had changed in just a few hours. There I was, in bed with an attractive woman in a motel room - a situation I would have loved under different circumstances. The problem was that the woman was really my best friend, and the body I was now in was not exactly the one I would have chosen to take advantage of the situation.

Still, my mind had drifted to thoughts of sex. It was unavoidable, I supposed, since lying there quietly not having to speak had freed up my senses to explore the body I was now in. I was used to sleeping on my side, feeling my male organs drooping down as I did, carefully arranging my legs to give them room. Not now though. now there was nothing but a void between my legs. Oh, I was plenty sensitive in that region, but there was nothing tugging at me as before.

The tug I felt was on my chest. While I realized intellectually that my breasts were actually a little on the small side, their presence was new, causing me to be a bit more comfortable when lying on my back, forcing them to spread a little more evenly across my chest.

The sheets felt a bit rougher, as if my skin was somewhat smoother and sensitive. I suppose, too, that the absence of most of my body hair meant more of my skin was exposed to the sheets. Perhaps this was why women's clothing seemed to be made mostly of softer fabrics.

Then there was my hair. As I moved my head, the long dark hair ebbed and flowed along the pillow, carrying with it a sensation that at once tickled and caressed. I found as I began to drift off a little that I had to keep pushing it away from my face. Tomorrow night, I resolved, I would tie it back to keep it from doing all that.

On the whole, I had to admit that the sensations of my new body were not all that unpleasant. In fact, had I given in to the occasional impulse I felt to explore the body with my hands, I was sure that I would have found the sensations quite pleasant. But all that notwithstanding, I recognized that I had no desire to be a girl - particularly an Oriental girl. It was an insidious punishment that the Judge had devised. And as I drifted off to sleep, I realized that in the morning, it would be even worse. I would be forced to go to school...

"Trish!"

Who the hell was Trish and why was a woman calling for her in my room?

"Trish!"

A cavalcade of sensations hit my waking body. Long hair. Boobs. The rest.

Oh shit! It wasn't just a dream.

"Trish!"

My eyes opened. The woman who had been Brooks was looking down at me. She was already dressed in shorts and a top like the day before.

"Get up!" she ordered. "You need to get ready for school."

"School?" I repeated stupidly.

"It's your father's idea," she explained. "He thinks you and Ralph should go to school today. It will give you a chance to meet some of the local kids and keep you out of the way while we get moved in. He's already taken Ralph out for a big greasy breakfast. Do you need any help getting ready?"

"No," I mumbled, crawling out of bed to the unpleasant feel of breasts shifting on my chest. "I'll just put it on automatic - if you know what I mean."

She nodded. It was obvious she had experienced the little trick of going with the flow. "Give a call if you need anything."

Sleepily I grabbed what I would need out of my suitcase and trudged off for the bathroom. It wasn't until I got in there that I realized Brooks had referred to my "father" without making it sound sarcastic. Wasn't he - she - getting into playing the part just a little too well?

Of course she had already experienced something that I was just then experiencing - seeing my body naked for its shower. There was no denying that I was all girl - and an attractive one at that. I cringed at the thought of going to school. I'd be driving all the little boys wild.

Or would I? I wondered as I turned on the water. I never had any interest in Oriental girls when I was in high school or college. Oh, I could appreciate that many of them were quite attractive, but my dislike of all things and people Japanese seemed to extend to my

sexual preferences as well. With so many nice looking white girls in the world, why go Oriental? Let them stick to their own kind, I had always said.

But now I realized as I soaped my delicately golden skin, I was Oriental. I was a stranger in a strange land, surrounded by the whites I had always been comfortable with. Now I was different. Would I have felt any more comfortable back in the California I had supposedly come from? Probably. I would have still felt uncomfortable to be in the body of a girl, but I wouldn't have felt nearly as conspicuous.

Well, I realized resolutely, I might be an Oriental girl, but it wasn't as if I was a Japanese exchange student. I spoke flawless English and I had seen enough of the clothing provided for me to know I would be dressed just like all the other teenage girls in the high school. Maybe they'd just ignore me. That would be fine with me.

"Not bad," Brooks said approvingly as I stepped out of the bathroom. I had managed to make myself look like a typical teenage girl. It hadn't been that difficult. I just retreated into my own mind and let the body do the rest. Oh, there had been a little temptation to fondle myself in the shower, but I had resisted it. As for fixing my hair and makeup, I just pulled back into something resembling an Alpha state and observed. I did try to exert a little control to get my body to lighten up on the eyeliner but to no avail.

As for clothes, I wore jeans shorts again and a white knit top. I opted for tennis shoes with white socks. I discovered too late that the socks had a lacy little top, but what the hell. It wasn't like I was wearing pantyhose and heels or something.

"You need earrings," Brooks observed.

"Oh please."

She shrugged. "Suit yourself. But remember, you want to fit in today. Girls wear bracelets and necklaces and earrings - you know that."

"Okay," I finally agreed with a sigh. After all, I had been wearing them the day before. "I'll put in earrings. But forget about the other stuff. I

don't want to look like a walking jewelry store."

I had just gotten them in my ears when the door opened. Ralph and "Dad" looked well satisfied. I imagined that they had just gone out and enjoyed a big cholesterol-loaded breakfast and done a little male bonding. I could remember doing the same thing with my father when I was a boy. I found myself getting envious. I had the sudden thought that I could have handled all of this transformation crap if I had been made a male - even a young Japanese male like Ralph.

I was still brooding about that when we were dropped off at school. I had three strikes against me. I was a girl, an Oriental, and a juvenile. Even Brooks had only gotten two strikes. He - oops, she - was at least an adult. And if I didn't know better, I'd say she was actually starting to enjoy lording it over me as if she actually was my mother. But what could I do about it? In the eyes of everyone who counted, she was my mother. If I gave her any lip, I'd probably just have "Dad" down on me. Resolutely I slung the purse Brooks had insisted I take over my shoulder and followed Ralph up the steps of Ovid High School.

Maybe Brooks was right, I thought as I entered the high school to the curious looks of the other teens. Maybe the best course of action was to act as normal as possible. The more inconspicuous I acted, the less embarrassing this whole experience might be. Then, after a weekend in hell, Brooks and I would demand to see the Judge on Monday as planned.

Yes, that was how it would be.

So until then, I would just have to be Patricia Sue Yamamoto. Shit.

Ralph and I reported to the Counselor's Office to get our class schedules. He was a freshman, so he and I would be in entirely different courses. I found I was actually a little disturbed to lose Ralph's companionship. True, he was one of the transparent people, but I had touched him and knew he was solid enough. And although I hardly thought of him as a brother like my two real ones, I did feel somehow close to him. For one thing, he seemed as nervous as I about being in a new school. Maybe he wondered how he would be

accepted. I hadn't noticed any other Orientals in town, so we were obviously different.

As I waited for the counselor to return from taking Ralph to his first class, I thought for a moment about the whole racial thing. I had never liked the Japanese - or Orientals in general for that matter. Yet now I was one. It was a rather heavy-handed punishment in my opinion - one that was completely undeserved. For one thing, I had never been cruel to someone just because he or she was Japanese. I just avoided them. It wasn't as if I walked around mumbling about how we should kill all the slant-eyes, was it? Since when was it a crime not to like the Japanese?

Yet unavoidably, I was now Japanese. Well, I mean my ancestry was Japanese. I was an American. My whole "family" was American. I didn't speak a word of Japanese or have any idea who the Prime Minister of Japan was. I spoke English with a California accent (or rather a California lack of accent) and could sing the Star Spangled Banner. I just hoped everyone in the high school would see it that way. I just hoped...

...I just hoped I wouldn't run into someone who felt the same way about the Japanese that I always did.

"Are you ready, Patricia?" the counselor asked. Ms. Phelps was the typical high school counselor. She reminded me of the one in my high school years ago. She was dressed in business attire consisting of a pastel green dress covered with a white business jacket. Her heels were only an inch high and sensibly wide and her jewelry and makeup were a little understated. I found myself a little disturbed that I would have taken the time to first examine her clothing before noticing that she was a very attractive brunette with rather prominent breasts. So what if she was a little transparent?

"I guess so," I replied, sounding much more like a typical teenager than I cared to. I felt like a condemned prisoner as I walked down the corridor with Ms. Phelps. She tried to be friendly, looking down on me from her lofty five foot seven height, asking me how I liked Ovid. I gave her a teenage "okay" followed by yes and no answers to other

questions. I know she was trying to make me feel at ease, but unfortunately, her efforts had just the opposite effect because she was treating me just like a teenage girl.

By the time I approached the classroom, I was almost terrified. She had told me that I'd make lots of new friends and that I was so pretty I'd have no trouble 'attracting boys just like flies.' I'd rather attract flies, I thought to myself.

I don't know exactly what I expected. Maybe I thought everyone in the classroom would laugh at me. No one did, though. In fact as the teacher came over to meet me, only a few of the students even bothered to look at me. The others were too busy working or whispering to each other while the teacher was distracted.

Most of the class I noticed had that strange transparent look, but a few were real. One in particular caught my eye - mostly because she was looking intently at me. She had blonde hair, about medium length and the face of an angel. I immediately pegged her as the typical stuck-up little cheerleader type. She was everything I wasn't - or had no desire to be: feminine, attractive, wearing all the right things with all the right labels. I was sure in my mind that the captain of the football team had broken her cherry right after the last homecoming game. In short, I hated her.

I expected a return look of hatred from her, but to my surprise, she looked merely curious. I thought maybe growing up out in a small Oklahoma town, she had never seen an Oriental before. But no, the look was more than that. It was then that I really realized for the first time that Brooks and I weren't alone. The girl's look almost seemed to be one of speculation as to what my former identity had been. She - and probably others in Ovid - must be like me, I thought. We were all victims of that self-righteous sorcerer who called himself the Judge.

"Patricia," Ms. Phelps began, breaking into my thoughts, "this is Ms. Dunlap, your English teacher."

I found myself nodding to a woman of perhaps forty. She was solid and rather pretty, with dark red hair styled short with a subtle curl. She

smiled at me. "Welcome to Ovid, Patricia. There's an empty seat over in the far row. I've put a book out for you and an assignment sheet."

Then, turning to the class, she said, "Class this is Patricia Yamamoto. Her family has just moved here from California. So please take a moment after class to introduce yourself."

I remember having that occasional dream everyone has where you find yourself back in high school - usually wearing either your pajamas or nothing at all - and you haven't the foggiest notion why you're even there. Well, that was how I felt at that moment. I even glanced down to make sure my breasts weren't exposed or something. I could feel my face redden as I was introduced to the class as a girl. I hoped they didn't notice. Maybe with my skin color nobody would.

As quickly as decorum would permit, I slinked over to the empty seat and slid in. Just my luck. I was sitting right next to the blonde. She gave me an infuriatingly warm smile. I ignored it and pretended to review my assignment sheet.

Class went by miserably slowly. I kept getting the feeling that everyone in the room was watching me, sizing me up. When I would dare an occasional glance around, I got confirmation of this. A girl's head would duck down here and there. The girls were at least subtle about it. I could imagine they were just sizing me up to determine if I was up to their standards. The guys though...oh God.

Hey, I used to be a guy. I knew how they operated when a new girl showed up in class. If the girl was cute - and I knew I was, Oriental or not - he would entertain a little fantasy. What would it be like to have those golden legs wrapped around my back? What would it be like to have those full lips sucking on my cock? Then "what if" would become "I wonder." I wonder if she goes down. I wonder if she's a virgin. I wonder. Oh shit.

Mercifully the bell rang. I rushed to get all my things together before anyone could introduce themselves. To my surprise though, no one did - with one exception.

"Hi, Patricia," the blonde I had sworn would be my mortal enemy said

with a friendly smile.

I was forced to look at her. To my surprise, I saw warm intelligence behind her lovely blue eyes. Her smile was genuine. There was something about her that made it hard to dislike her. I felt my defenses weakening and even managed a weak, "Hi."

"I'm Jennifer Tilton," she said, extending her slender, feminine hand.

Good, I thought. Jennifer - not Jenny. Somehow that made her less "cutesy." Maybe she wasn't a cheerleader after all. With only a moment of hesitation, I took her hand. Again I was pleasantly surprised. She had a firm handshake. If I had ignored the feminine shape of her fingernails with their pink polish, I might have thought it was the hand of a small man.

"P- Trish..." I stumbled over my own new name.

She looked me directly in the eye. "Have you met the Judge?"

It was an odd and unexpected question. The look in Jennifer's eyes was not the look of a fifteen year old girl. I already suspected that there were many more transformed citizens in Ovid, but it was the first time someone had confirmed my suspicions.

"I have," I admitted, realizing that in spite of my first impression, I was forming a bond of conspiratorial friendship with this girl.

Jennifer favored me with a grin. "Good. You remember. I thought you did. What's your next class?"

"Oh, uh... Biology," I replied, fumbling with my schedule.

"Bummer. I've got Spanish. Tell you what though - I'll meet you at your locker before lunch period and we'll talk. Where's your locker?"

"My locker?"

Jennifer sighed, rifling through the sheaf of papers the counselor had given me until she found a sheet with a small envelope attached to it. "It says here you've got locker 301. Good. I've got 315 so we're close." She gave me directions to the locker as well as my next class

and hurried off for her own class.

She was wearing shorts, too, just like mine. Her top was pink though, and she wore her femininity well. I wondered who she had been before the Judge got hold of her. Obviously she had always been a girl. No man even so completely transformed as I could have walked with such a confident feminine wiggle. Watching her leave the room, I had another reason to regret my transformation. I would have really enjoyed getting hard as I watched her wiggle away.

The funny thing was that thought was more intellectual than physical. I realized as I walked to my next class that watching all the little teen honeys did nothing for me. In fact, my main concern in watching the girls was to make sure I looked and acted like they did. Being Japanese was different enough for me - I didn't want to look any more out of place than just my race.

I found myself noticing the guys, too, but not in the same way. The guys were... well they were guys. I found myself intimidated by their size. I seemed to be shorter than any of them. And I felt so weak, watching them all move with what could best be called a swagger, their muscles in evidence. Even the wimpy ones looked like they could take me two falls out of three. It isn't that I had been a particularly large man, but I had been larger than average, and being athletic all my life, I had worked to keep my body fit and trim. Had I moved like that? Maybe not. Or maybe I had moved like that in high school when I still had the world on a string.

The entire morning was something of a drag. About the only exception had been the biology class. I had been a decent student in high school and college, so most of the morning had been like watching a rerun on TV. Sure, a few things changed, but not many. But biology had changed a lot since my high school days when I had last taken the course. I had always been interested in science, but my dad had discouraged it. He used to say that Americans did all the basic research and then the damned Japs stole it and made all the money from American inventions. I guess that discouraged me from even trying. But now with all the advances in genetics, I found biology was

more than just memorizing phylums. I'd have a lot of catching up to do in that class, but it promised to be an interesting experience.

On the social side, I was either ignored or the subject of curious glances. No one took the time to talk to me, instead spending the brief moments between class chatting with friends or trying to impress a member of the opposite sex. I noticed the ones who were sort of transparent acted no different from the completely solid ones. They all just acted like normal teenagers, making me wonder if I had been right about how many were actually transformed.

I was fumbling about in my locker just before lunch, pretending to be doing something important when Jennifer showed up.

"You'll need a mirror in your locker."

"Why?"

"So you can fix your hair and your makeup whenever you get the chance," she said with an evil grin. "In fact, you could do with a trip to the little girl's room right now."

"Oh, I went before my last class," I told her stupidly.

"Just my luck," she said with a mock sigh as she rolled her eyes. "I get stuck trying to help Forrest Gump."

She practically dragged me to the nearest restroom where she proceeded to fuss with my hair. "You've got to pay a little more attention to how you look," she said after looking around to make sure we were alone. "You've got nice hair, but you've got to keep it looking nice. And as for your lipstick, quit chewing on your lip. You've got some on your teeth now and none on your lower lip. Give me your lipstick."

I numbly produced a tube of lipstick from my purse. She snatched it and began to work on me.

"You know I'm not - "

"I know you're not really a girl," she said, completing my sentence for me. "Don't move. It's tough enough putting this stuff on somebody else

as it is."

When she had finished, she inspected me critically. "There. Not bad. The eyes could use a little work, but it'll do. Let's go to lunch."

"But- "

"We'll talk at lunch," she said, hustling me out of the restroom.

Lunch was everything I feared it would be and more. Whoever first thought to mix macaroni with chili should be shot. And the meal planner who decided to serve a cinnamon roll with it should at least be in line for a long prison sentence.

"Not much, is it?" Jennifer said as we sat down at a small table as far away as possible from the other students.

"Not really," I agreed, opening my carton of milk. At least they couldn't ruin that.

"I remember back when I was in college," Jennifer began, toying with her food. "Training tables always meant good food. This junk wouldn't have even been good enough to start a food fight with."

"Training tables?" I muttered. "College?"

Jennifer nodded with a grin. "I'll tell you all about me later. Right now let's talk about you. What are you in for?"

"In for?"

Jennifer gave another mock sigh. "Haven't you ever watched prison movies?"

"Oh! Oh, I see what you mean." I looked down. What was I going to say? That the Judge had made me like this because I didn't like Orientals? Somehow, that didn't seem like a good answer.

Jennifer just laughed. "Never mind. I don't think any of us know why the Judge does what he does. Some of us think he has a master plan. Others of us just think he's a randy bastard who gets his jollies out of changing us -you know swapping sexes and what all."

"Wait a minute," I interjected. "You mean you were a... No! You've

always been a girl, right?"

"Wrong." There was that grin again. "There's no real pattern, but most of the real girls you meet here used to be male. Not all, of course. My boyfriend, Barry - he was male before. But my guess is that most men who come to Ovid end up with tits and a slit."

"I'm really confused."

"You'll learn," she said with a shrug.

I noted a few people would wave at Jennifer but no one bothered us at the table. I asked her about that.

"Well," she began, "most of my friends are seniors. We get together after school but not much during the day. Barry sits with me most of the time, but I asked him not to join us for lunch so I could talk to you alone."

I must have looked a little stricken. "Oh, you mean so you can tell me about periods and that sort of stuff."

She chuckled, "No, but I suppose it wouldn't be a bad idea. If you want, we can discuss that at another time. My period is coming up in a few days and I don't like to be reminded of it over lunch.

"The reason we're talking one-on-one is that that is the only way we can discuss your transformation. If there are more than two of us in the conversation, we can't talk about any of the magical elements of Ovid. We have to act like normal teenagers in a normal town or we can't talk at all."

That unsettled me. Everything I learned about Ovid seemed to show me that the magic behind the town was even greater than I had imagined when I had been transformed. "The... the Judge did all of this?"

She nodded. "Most of it. Of course, he has... associates. They're pretty powerful in their own right. I can't tell you much about that though."

"Another taboo?"

Another nod. "Exactly. You'll figure that one out, though. We all do eventually."

I was silent for a moment and then asked, "Has anyone ever gotten out of Ovid?"

"By getting out I assume you mean getting changed back into their old selves and blowing this wide spot in the road?"

It was my turn to nod.

"Then the answer is no. Or at least I don't think anyone has. People come and go all the time - once they're trusted. I'm not one of the trustees though. The Judge definitely doesn't trust me. Right after Daddy got me a car, I tried to leave town - just for the heck of it you understand."

"What happened?"

She shrugged. "I went south past the airport and out of the valley. But when I crested the last hill out of this valley, I found myself approaching Ovid from the north. It was as if space had looped back on itself. I think they're playing tricks with time, too, but I can't be sure on that one."

I wanted to ask her what she meant about "tricks with time", several students sat down at the table behind us. Since they were within earshot, Jennifer indicated with a shake of her head that we'd have to continue our conversation later. "Look, I have to go see Barry before class. Why don't we get together tomorrow? Since it's Saturday, we can do something together."

"Like go to the mall and try on clothes?" I asked wryly.

Ignoring the sarcasm, she replied with a grin, "Sorry, but there's no mall in Ovid. We'll find something to do though."

With that she was gone. I had never felt so alone as I did then, sitting by myself at that table surrounded by hundreds of students. I quickly policed my area and picked up my tray, my meal only half eaten. I really wasn't very hungry.

I didn't get far though. As I turned, a lanky kid with an animal look in his eyes was blocking my way. He had just gotten up from a table in my path. A look down at his half-eaten meal told me he had just gotten up specifically to block my way.

He grinned an absolutely feral grin. "Hey, you must be new here."

I didn't reply. There was no way around him. My heart was pounding. Settle down, I told myself. He isn't going to hit you. You're a girl now. He may be a bully, but he wouldn't dare hit a girl in the student cafeteria.

"My name's Duck. You know it rhymes with - "

"I know what it rhymes with," I interrupted nervously.

The grin got wider. "So what's your name, honey?"

"P- Patricia. Patricia Yamamoto."

I was suddenly aware that two more Neanderthal clones had come up to join their friend. I was effectively surrounded.

"Hey, Duck," one of them said, "wasn't Yamamoto the dude who did us at Pearl Harbor?"

My God, the thing was capable of learning something in a history class?

"Yeah, I think you're right," Duck said. I began to realize this was a setup. They must have overheard someone far smarter than they mentioning the name of the famous Japanese admiral. I hadn't really thought about it before, but I supposed it was a name some might take offense to. Thanks, Judge.

"It's a common Japanese name," a more intelligent voice said from behind me. I turned to see a teen about my present age. He was fairly tall and slender and wore glasses over his blue eyes. He was as solid as I was while his three potential opponents had that transparent look. I was shocked at his bravery, approaching those three morons. He looked as if he wouldn't even be a good match for one of them.

"Yama means mountain in Japanese," he explained, ignoring the

scowls from the Three Stooges. "And moto means formerly. Put them together and they mean 'formerly from the mountains.' Given that Japan is a rather mountainous country, it's a pretty common name."

"So what makes you so damned smart, Meecham?" Duck asked. It was far less of a challenge than I would have expected from him.

"I read, Duck," the teen - Meecham - said calmly. "You know – books? Those things with words on them?"

"Watch it, Meecham," Duck growled, but there was something I wouldn't have expected in his voice. Was it fear?

Meecham just answered with a little smile, setting his empty tray down as if to show he was ready to meet any challenge.

To my surprise, the three apes slunk away without another word. There was suddenly animated conversation in the room. I had been too occupied to notice that everyone had gotten quiet to watch the confrontation.

The teen - Meecham - just smiled at me. "Hi," he said. Then, extending a hand, "Luke Meecham."

Reflexively I extended my own hand, discovering for the first time how small it was as it was enveloped by Luke's much larger one. "Trish Yamamoto." Then I added, "How did you know what my name meant?"

His smile got wider. "Oh, just one of those things you pick up. I've always been interested in Japan. I'd love to go there someday."

Not me. I had no desire to ever set foot in Japan, but I didn't tell him that. After all, I was supposed to be Japanese - by ancestry at least.

"Well," I began after a silent pause, "thanks for helping me out there."

Now the smile became a laugh. "Don't worry about Duck and the boys. They think they're tough, but it's mostly just bluster."

That was fine for him to say. He wasn't just a shade over five feet tall and female to boot. "So how did he end up with a name like Duck?"

"His real name is Terrence," Luke explained, "but anybody who calls him that really is asking for it. He used to be part of a little unofficial gang of toughs that called themselves 'The Animals.' There was Bull - he was their leader then - and Horse and... well, you get the idea."

"There's something you're not telling me," I pointed out, noting the sly look on his face.

"Well... Duck used to be called Panther. Then there was a little fight with some of the guys on the basketball team one night. He didn't see a punch coming, but one of his pals did, and..."

"...and he yelled 'Duck' and the name stuck," I finished for him with a smile of my own. I had a pretty good hunch that it was Luke who had thrown that punch. So he was smart and an athlete. And he wasn't bad looking... Don't go there.

"Something like that," he agreed.

There was that silence again.

"Well," I began, "I guess I'd better get to my next class..."

"Can I walk you there?" he asked, a hopeful look on his face. "I mean, since you're new to the school and all, I thought maybe..."

I managed to favor him with a small smile. "That's okay. I know where it is."

"Well...uh... maybe I'll see you around?"

"Sure."

I left him there, sort of staring out into space. I wasn't stupid. I knew what was going on. I had been on the other side of such an exchange many times in my life. I did owe Luke for getting me off the hook with Duck and the boys, but I didn't want him to take the knight in shining armor role too far. I had been a girl for only a day, and I had no intention of being on some guy's arm then or ever.

But ever was a long, long time, I told myself as I sat in a rather boring social studies class. As much as I wanted to see the Judge and try to get out of this new life, I knew even then that my chances were slim at

best. Odds were that I was going to be Patricia Yamamoto for the rest of my life. That meant either life without sex or pick some sort of sexual identity as a woman.

The idea of being a lesbian didn't appeal much to me. Take Jennifer, for example. She was cute, vivacious, and, judging from the labels on her clothing, probably from an affluent family. Still, sexually she did nothing at all for me. That was probably just as well since she had said something about a boyfriend.

But on the other hand, did boys do anything for me? I recognized Luke as an attractive boy. But I would have recognized that even in my real life. It isn't that I was into guys, but I could recognize a particularly good-looking guy as well as anyone. So did Luke do anything for me? Was there some faint stirring in my nipples or my new crotch? I didn't think so. I just couldn't imagine his arm around me or - worse yet - his lips on mine or... now there was a little twinge down there. Think of something else I told myself. Think of how much you'd like to wring that bastard Judge's neck.

The afternoon dragged on. At least it was punctuated by a gym class. It would be good to burn off a few calories and a lot of frustration, I thought. I didn't even have to worry about gym clothes since the school provided them. It was just a T-shirt with an eagle in black on the front and white shorts, but at least it made me look just like all the other girls. I was grateful that I had worn sneakers that day.

It felt so odd to get undressed in front of a bunch of girls. At least I didn't have to think about it too much. Some of them had used the informality of gym period to ask me questions. Oh, they were innocent enough questions, but they did ruffle my feathers a little. Some of the girls had been surprised that I spoke English "so well." Others wanted to know what it was like to wear a kimono or eat raw fish. Well, I had eaten raw fish before in a sushi bar back in Detroit, but they seemed to think because I looked Japanese that I was really from there.

I seemed doomed to be thought of as different. I doubted if they all thought the several Indians in the school lived in tepees, or if they thought the black girls wore lion skins and hunted in the jungle.

Certainly they wouldn't have thought Nancy White was from England or Debbie Brandt was from Germany just because of their last names. What gave them the right to think I was really from Japan? I was from California - or at least I was supposed to be.

At least Jennifer was in the gym class with me. Somehow it helped to have the one person I was already starting to think of as a friend in there with me. Of course, she would have to pull a devilish little stunt. While we were disrobing to get in our gym gear, she caught me looking at her well-formed breasts. When she was sure no one was watching, she put her hands underneath them to give them a little heft and then grinned wickedly at me.

I felt my face redden and hoped no one else had noticed. That's all I would need - to have some of the other girls decide I was a lesbian. But the really strange thing was that my thoughts about Jennifer's breasts hadn't included the "nice set of knockers" thought that I might have normally had. Actually, I had been thinking that she was a little larger in that department than me, and I found myself... curious. All right, so curiosity wasn't exactly right. More like... envy? No, surely not!

Gym class was fairly easy for me. I had always stayed in pretty good shape as a male, so I knew all the right moves for limbering up. Even though my new body was weaker than my male one, it was in pretty good shape. Of course, it was considerably younger and had probably never been weakened by smoking.

I saw some of the girls limbering up. Jennifer seemed to be particularly agile, twisting her body with ease. Her muscles were feminine in shape but visible. She kept herself in great physical shape; that much was obvious.

Before we started an intramural game of volleyball, I just had to satisfy my curiosity. As a male, I had never been able to do the splits. Like most guys, I had tried, but like most guys, I had practically ruptured myself. This new body seemed so incredibly limber, I wondered if I could do it.

My first attempt was a failure. I stopped myself before I had to really commit, stumbling rather clumsily. Fortunately no one seemed to notice. We were getting about ready to start our game, so it was now or never. I remembered my experiences in getting ready for school. If my body knew how to get dressed for the day as a female, did it know how to do the splits?

It was almost like going into an Alpha state. I just relaxed my body and told it what to do. Maybe I should have given my body more specific instructions, for I suddenly felt myself diving down on one of the mats, rolling expertly, and coming out of the roll into a perfect split.

This time, everyone noticed.

There was such an uproar that at first I thought I had done something wrong. Then I realized it was just girlish squeals of delight. Even Jennifer was yelling, "Wow, Trish, that was fantastic!"

Fantastic? I had thought all girls could do the splits with ease. Without all the heavy equipment between the legs, it seemed as if it should be simple enough. But apparently I was wrong. Or maybe it was just the way I had done it - with the roll and all.

Once the other girls had had a chance to congratulate me, the coach called for us to choose sides and start to play volleyball. I was very surprised to be picked fairly early for a team. Given my short stature and unknown abilities, it seemed almost an honor not to be chosen last. Perhaps my little trick had been the difference, I thought.

I'm sure the captain of my team wondered if her confidence had been badly misplaced - at least early in the game. I simply wasn't used to my female muscles and wasn't willing to go on automatic to play the game, assuming that was possible. So when it came my turn to serve, my weaker arms weren't able to get the ball over the net. My smaller body caused me to miss saves that my old body would have found child's play. But I had played a lot of volleyball back in college, and it wasn't long before I was able to adjust to my new size and strength. I wasn't at my best, but I thought I played fairly well - well enough to pull my own weight, as modest as that was.

Jennifer thought so, too. She had been on the opposing team, and my final shot of the game - the winning shot, I might add - had dropped right at her feet. "Good game," she told me when we were alone.

"What?" I asked. I hadn't really been listening. I was still overcoming the shock of taking a shower with twenty other girls. I was in a boy's paradise. It was a shame I had to be a girl to get there.

"I said good game." She was using a towel to pat her breasts as she spoke. In that moment, standing there looking at her as I patted my own breasts, I would have given my very soul to have my male equipment back.

"Uh...thanks."

"You really impressed everyone with your little gymnastics display," she continued. "I don't think I would have had the guts to do that when I first got here."

"Have you tried it since?" I asked as I stepped into my panties.

"Sure," she laughed. "Hey, I used to play football. You know - once a jock always a jock."

"So are you on any of the girl's teams?" Damn bra was a pain to put on.

"No," she said, a little wistfully I thought. As she dressed, she continued, "When I first got changed, I was so upset about what had been done to me that I didn't do much of anything. Oh, I studied and did okay in school, but that was because if I didn't, I'd just be limiting my own future. I didn't date, though, and I tried to be as unfeminine as I could. The idea of playing on a sissy girl's team was too much for a former college football player like me."

"You could still go out for a team," I pointed out.

She shook her head. "No, not really. The girl's coach is a little bit of a tight ass when it comes to latecomers. She thinks if you didn't play as a freshman, you've got no business being on the team. You just aren't committed enough for her."

"Pretty shortsighted of her," I observed.

"I can live with it," Jennifer replied, but I could tell she was really bothered by it. She had been a football player at one time. That meant that like me, she had been male. I didn't know if she had played high school ball or maybe even college or professional ball, but she was an athlete at heart.

I got the right school bus to my new home on the first try. I practically ran to the school bus when the day was over. I was so tired of being stared at - of being different. It was with relief that I saw Ralph sitting alone near the back of the bus. There wasn't another student within four rows of him. I plopped down in very unladylike fashion next to him. Even though he had that ghostly transparency about him, I felt closer to him than anyone else on the bus.

"So how was your day?" I asked him quietly.

"It sucked," he replied, looking out the window with an expression of disgust.

I could relate to that, but in ways he'd never understand. "So what happened?"

"They're all a bunch of hicks," he muttered, being careful not to say it too loudly. "They've never even seen an Oriental before. They wanted to know if I was actually from Japan."

"They asked me the same thing," I said with a sigh.

"I said hell no, I'm an American. You know what they did then? They laughed! Like I was making a joke or something." Ralph slumped down in his seat as best he could, his arms folded.

I knew how he felt. None of the teens had been malicious – except maybe for Duck and his friends. They had all been curious about us, but they hadn't taunted us or anything. What they had done was try to classify us. In their minds, we were as alien as if we had come from another planet. Had we been white - normal by their measure - we would probably have been treated differently.

I had to grimly admire the Judge for his sense of irony if not

punishment. Had I been my old self, reduced to the age of a high school student again, I might have treated Patricia and Ralph the same way that these teens did - or maybe worse.

The odd thing was that it had taken this transformation to make me see what I had been. I had never considered myself prejudiced before. I had grown up around blacks and Jews and honestly did number some of them as my friends. Japanese folks have never been terribly popular in a city like Detroit where they're a visible reminder of successful foreign competition. I had always avoided them, looked down on them. Now the tables were turned and how did I feel?

Well, I felt as if I was the aggrieved party now. I had done nothing to deserve being set apart. If I was forced to spend the rest of my life as Patricia Yamamoto, I would just want the same things every other American wanted. I would have no unfair advantage which might fuel hatred or envy. There would be nothing about me which would make me different - except the color of my skin.

I picked a damned fine time to figure all of that out, I thought as I slumped down in my own seat, hoping Ralph didn't notice the tears in my eyes.

And I was in for a rude shock when we got home. Of course, our new house was in an uproar, with most of the furniture in place but boxes and paper everywhere. The moving truck had already left, so I was spared being ogled by imagined beefy moving men. The shock was finding Brooks and "Dad" in an embrace amidst the chaos.

"Get a room, guys," Ralph said with a mischievous grin. "Dad" laughed, but Brooks positively giggled. Me? I guess I just stood there with my mouth open. I knew Brooks and I had no choice but to play our roles, but Brooks actually seemed to enjoy the part. I had a sudden thought that perhaps Brooks had been homosexual and I just hadn't known it. Jeez, and we had actually shared a bed once in some little town in Missouri. But no, I reminded myself, Brooks was as big a skirt chaser as I was. More than once we had scored in the same motel room with a couple of local girls. He had to be as normal as me.

"What the hell were you doing?" I asked her when we were finally alone, sorting out the stuff still boxed in my room. I had barely been able to contain myself waiting for her to peel herself off dear old Dad and come into my room where I was waiting for her, still fuming.

"When?" she asked innocently.

"Downstairs, when Ralph and I came in. You had your arms around that... that..."

"Just try to think of him as your father," Brooks said primly. There was something she wasn't telling me, I realized.

"Are you kidding?" I gasped, plopping down on the bed with my arms folded. "My father? My father's been dead for five years. That... creature isn't my father and never will be."

Brooks sat beside me. She put an arm around me, which I shrugged off. With a sigh, she began, "I've been here all day with Don - that's his name by the way. He's really a nice guy."

"He's not even real," I pointed out.

She shook her head. "You're wrong about that. He's as real as you or me. He and Ralph are just... different. He feels solid..."

"You should know" I grumbled. "It didn't take you very long to turn into the Japanese Donna Reed. I'm surprised you're still in shorts. I'd expect you to be wearing a dress and heels while you polish the silver."

"All right, that's enough!" She jumped to her feet. I had almost expected her to add "young lady" but she didn't. "So what did you do today? Hang out with the guys? Talk about cars? Maybe go out for football?"

She had me there. I could feel my face flush. I had spent the entire day acting like the girl I had become. "No...I..."

"No, you hung around with the girls. You were shy around boys. You touched up your lipstick a couple of times. You looked at some guy's tight buns and giggled with the other girls. You blushed a few times."

Damn, she was good! I had done all of those things. "Yeah, but I didn't - "

"You didn't kiss and hug a guy."

"Well..."

"Look, Trish - and don't try to correct me. That's your name now - Trish. You acted like a girl today because that's what everyone thinks you are. If you'd acted any differently, it would only have caused problems."

I didn't say anything. She was right, of course. Seeing she had my attention, she continued, "I've been here most of the day with Don getting us moved in. I've had to act the part of the loving wife, and I can assure you, whatever Don is, he loves his wife - me! If I didn't act the part, he'd think something was wrong, and that might cause problems."

"So you're just acting as if you love him," I said slowly.

"Of course."

Was it my imagination, or was her reply a little hollow? What was she hiding? I looked up into her pretty brown eyes. "So you still want to go with me Monday to see the Judge and get him to change us back?"

"I promised I'd go with you," she confirmed.

I was so relieved, I jumped up and hugged her before I realized what I was doing. I quickly dropped my arms to my side and lowered my eyes in embarrassment.

Brooks smiled at me. "It's sort of hard not to act the part, isn't it?"

"I guess so," I said softly, realizing how much I must have sounded like a typical teenaged girl.

"Look," Brooks said brightly, "go ahead and get ready. We'll leave in about an hour."

I looked up, puzzled. "Leave for where?"

"For dinner, silly. Don't you remember? Your father is taking us out

someplace nice for dinner to celebrate our new home."

I suddenly realized "someplace nice" meant an unwanted change of clothes. "now wait a minute, Brooks. I - "

"Not Brooks - Mom. Remember?" she chided me. "We have to act the part."

Damn! Why did she have to be right all the time? "You want me to wear a skirt, don't you?"

She gave me a very wicked smile. "I sure don't plan to wear a dress and heels by myself."

Double damn!

Before I could answer, she pulled something from my closet. The bad news was that it was a dress. The good news was that it was one of the ankle length summer dresses I had seen many teens wearing. That meant I wasn't going to be showing off my legs for everyone. "Do you need any help with it?" she asked.

"No," I replied with a tired sigh. "I think I can figure it out."

And figure it out I did. I had to admit I looked pretty good in it. The dress had puffy short sleeves and a squared-off front that while modest indicated that I did indeed have breasts. I knew I would be expected to wear jewelry, so I found a small heart-shaped gold locket to wear around my neck. The dress itself was black (to match my mood) but it was accented with a pattern of tiny yellow and white flowers. As much as I hated to admit it, I did look good in it. For shoes, I chose a pair of low black heels. I didn't really want heels, but they seemed to be the only type of shoe in my closet that would work with the dress. At least I picked the lowest heel. And since my legs were well covered, I saw no reason to wear nylons with the outfit.

The males in my new family wore sport coats and both wore reasonably stylish ties. Brooks wore a nice woman's suit. It was black with a short skirt, and with the shimmering silk blouse, high heels, and all the right accessories, I had to admit she made a fine looking woman. She looked almost too young to have a couple of teenagers.

To be honest, I was a little unsettled with how great she looked. "How did you manage to look so good?" I whispered to her as we walked to the car.

"I just went on automatic," she explained. "This is what happened. Not bad, huh?"

"Not bad at all." I grinned at her. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought she was trying to get dear old Dad all turned on.

Dinner went pretty well. It turned out we were a little overdressed but none of the other patrons seemed to mind. Naturally they were a little curious about what an Oriental family was doing in their midst, but they kept quiet about it.

The restaurant - Winston's - seemed to specialize in steaks. My mouth watered at the thought of a big, juicy Midwestern steak. They've always been, in my opinion, the finest in the world. But before I could order the big Kansas City strip that I had planned on, Brooks ordered for Ralph and me, choosing a smaller filet for me. Later I had to admit to myself that she had been right. With my smaller size and appetite, I even ended leaving half of the smaller steak on my plate.

Later that night lying in bed, I had to congratulate myself on getting through my first full day as a girl. It hadn't been exactly enjoyable, but it hadn't been as difficult as I had thought it would be. Even wearing a dress and being admired by a few young guys - including our waiter - hadn't been so bad. If I could just get through this until Monday when I saw the Judge, I was sure I'd be all right.

My confidence was shattered by a sudden giggle followed by a deeper chuckle. Oh, Brooks had tried to keep it quiet, but I heard it none-the-less. My "parents'" room was separated from mine by a master bathroom accessible only from their room. While they had closed the door to their room, they had neglected to close the bathroom door, so there was only one wall separating their room from mine.

I quietly got out of bed, tiptoeing over to the wall. I was afraid of what I would discover, but I had to know. Of course Brooks would have to go to bed with "Dad" I realized. Again, it was necessary for her to play her

part. Maybe they had just shared a little joke before dropping off to sleep.

I put my ear to the wall, hearing nothing at first. I silently cursed myself for being so suspicious. How could I have possibly thought...

Then I heard a creaking sound. Someone is just turning over to sleep, I tried to tell myself. Then the cherry pie I had enjoyed after dinner turned suddenly sour in my stomach as I began to realize that the creaking was continuing in an almost steady rhythm. Then at nearly the same moment, I heard a masculine gasp and a feminine moan.

I shook my head in disbelief. How could Brooks do such a thing? This wasn't just playing a role. This was sick... perverted. Brooks was a man. He might not look like one now but deep down, he was a man - just like me.

I had to smile ironically at that thought as I looked down at my perky breasts sticking out of the ruffled pink nightie I wore. Somehow, there in the moonlight, they looked even larger than before. No, I certainly wasn't a man, but that didn't mean I had forgotten what it meant to be one. Even if I never returned to my original form, I would never allow a man to... to do what "Dad" had just done to Brooks.

As I slipped back into bed though, I remembered an old science fiction movie I had seen on TV. It was called Invasion of the Body Snatchers, and I remembered a scene toward the end where the hero left the heroine alone for a few minutes. While he was away, she fell asleep, allowing an alien life form to replace her. I remembered the horror on the hero's face when she told him that it wasn't so bad. Was that what Brooks would tell me in the morning? Like the hero in the movie, my friend was gone. In his place was a woman who would be more of a woman each passing day, I supposed.

Then, just before dropping off to sleep, I had one more thought. Brooks had agreed to go with me to see the Judge on Monday when I had pressed her, but she had said nothing about pressing him to change us back. I began to think that when I confronted the Judge, I would be doing so alone. With that dark thought, I drifted off to sleep.

I woke up in a better mood. Maybe it was just the bright spring sunlight spilling into my room. Or maybe it was because I just felt good. I had to admit to myself it was pretty neat to wake up in the morning feeling good. Dean Martin supposedly said he felt sorry for people who didn't drink since they woke up feeling as good as they'd feel all day. I was beginning to appreciate what he had meant. It actually felt good to wake up without the aftertaste of the previous night's drinking and smoking in my mouth.

It was odd, but I didn't miss smoking at all. As for drinking, when my "parents" had enjoyed a glass of wine the night before, I had been envious, but smoking was another matter. Apparently no one smoked in Ovid, so there wasn't a visual reminder of what it was like to smoke. And as for the physical need for a cigarette, my new body seemed to be completely free of nicotine. Still, losing my balls seemed far too high a price for giving up smoking.

As I got out of bed and stretched, I began to appreciate how limber my new body was. There were none of the morning creaks and groans of approaching middle age. I didn't think my old body had ever been as flexible as this one. There seemed to be no limit to the directions I could move.

"Trish!"

My thoughts were interrupted by Brooks' voice at my closed door.
"Yes?"

"Breakfast in five minutes, sleepy head."

I groaned. She was taking this whole mother thing far too seriously. Without a conscious thought, I slipped my hair into a loose ponytail and threw on a robe.

"I picked up some rolls," my dad said proudly, holding up a sack as if it were a hunting trophy. I had stumbled into the kitchen to be greeted with a scene of domesticity so normal that I found myself momentarily forgetting that this wasn't really my natural family. There was even a subtle acceptance of the man sitting at the table, sack of rolls in hand, as my father. He acted as if he were my father, and I suppose I was

acting as if I were his daughter.

Ralph was busy being the typical younger brother, ignoring me as he stuffed his face with a frosted cinnamon roll while reading the funnies. Like me, he wore only a robe, but his was plaid unlike the fuzzy pink one I had been forced to don.

As for Brooks - "Mom" - she was still in her robe as well. Hers was longer than mine and white, but she looked very feminine in it. She looked actually happy as she poured a glass of milk and handed it to me. "We don't have much this morning. Maybe by tomorrow, we'll have enough unpacked that I can make us a decent breakfast."

I gave Brooks a disgusted look I hoped the others didn't see. What was wrong with her? As a man, Brooks hated to cook. Of course as a man, Brooks would never have ended up in the sack breathing heavily while a man stuck -

"I thought I just heard a car in the driveway," Dad said, craning around to see.

"Oh! And you're the only one dressed," Brooks gasped. This from a person who had greeted me at his door while still in his underwear on numerous occasions.

Dad went to the door. I heard him speaking with someone. It sounded like a girl's voice. Moments later, Jennifer followed him into the kitchen. She had a friendly smile on her face - the kind of smile only a morning person could have at that time of day. Great. I had made one friend and she had to be a morning person.

Jennifer had picked up that knack many girls have of dressing casually and making it look damned good. Her red top was mildly revealing and set off her long blonde hair. Her denim shorts were just that - short. They fit tightly against her long legs, and with the slight heel on her sandals, she looked plenty hot.

She looked at me in mock surprise. "You're not even dressed yet!"

To be honest, I had forgotten that I had agreed to get together with her, and I certainly hadn't realized she had meant morning.

"That's okay," she said, not bothering to wait for an answer. She looked at Brooks. "And you must be Trish's mother. Hi. I'm Jennifer Tipton. I'm in some of Trish's classes."

Brooks smiled. "I'm pleased to meet you, Jennifer. I'm glad Trish is already making friends. Would you like a roll?"

"No thanks," she responded. "I've already eaten. I'd better get Trish moving. We've got a big day planned."

"Trish," Brooks said in a very motherly tone, "you didn't mention you had anything planned today."

Uh-oh. "Mom" was not just going to play loving wife. She planned to play concerned mother as well. I supposed I would have to play along. "I sort of forgot," I explained in my best vacuous teen voice. "Is it okay?"

Brooks smiled. "I suppose so. You have fun. But come by and tell me if you're going to be any later than five. We won't have a phone until Monday and your father's cell phone hasn't been activated yet."

Jennifer followed me up to my room and watched me as I closed the door just short of a slam. "Bad morning?" she asked.

"It's Brooks," I growled.

"Brooks?"

"The person who thinks she's my mother," I told her. I explained shortly who Brooks and I had been. "She's really been throwing herself into the role. It's almost as if she's forgotten who she used to be. Does that happen?"

"Not really," Jennifer said as she sat on the side of my bed while I paced. "Some people - most people - forget who they were before they were transformed. The rest of us remember who we were. I've never heard of someone remembering at first and then forgetting. Besides, that isn't what's happening anyway."

"So what is happening?" I asked, stopping to listen.

"Well, my mom used to be a guy," she explained. "Then, when she got

here and got changed, she seemed to be a lot more comfortable with her change after a few hours than I was after several months."

"As a guy, was she - he - gay or something?"

"No!" she laughed. "She just accepted what had happened to her and made the best of it. I learned a lot from her." There was suddenly a serious look on her face. "I think if it hadn't been for her, I would have gone crazy."

"Crazy?"

She nodded. "I liked being male. I liked sports. I was a big guy - raised on a farm back in Missouri. All I ever wanted to do was grow up and be a teacher and a coach."

"So how did you end up in Ovid?" I asked quietly.

"It was a plane crash," she explained. "It wiped out our entire college team."

"But I don't remember anything about a college team being killed in a plane crash in recent years," I pointed out. "There was that team at Wichita State a long time ago, but Jennifer couldn't have even been around then - even if you were transformed into a baby."

The smile was back, but it was thinner. "No, we were from Northwest Missouri State. You don't remember the crash because it never happened. You see, reality itself changed. Those of us who died never existed. That's why we can't go back to our old lives."

I thought about the fight in the bar that never happened - but should have. I had thought of the Judge as some sort of sorcerer who could make magical changes, but I had never dreamed he could do them on such a scale. If what Jennifer was saying was right, it was likely Allen Ripley and Dan Brooks never existed either. But what kind of being could have such power?

"Anyhow," Jennifer continued, "I fought the whole thing pretty hard. Mom helped me a lot though."

"So you like being a girl now?" I asked.

"I guess I do," she replied slowly. "If I had my choice in the matter, I think I'd still go back and live out my old life, but I like being a girl now too. Does that make any sense?"

"Not really," I admitted. I couldn't understand how she could miss her old life and be enjoying her new one all at the same time. Then I realized that was what she meant when she said her mother had helped her keep her sanity. She had learned to reconcile her past life with her new one, becoming a whole person in the process. "Or maybe it does."

She gave me a wide smile. "You're learning then. now get a shower and get dressed. We've got a lot to do today."

It took me almost an hour to get ready. Fool that I was, I had decided to wash my long, dark hair. If it hadn't been for Jennifer's help, it would have probably taken me an hour just to brush out and dry my hair. Embarrassed at having to ask for her help with my hair, I went on automatic to do the rest. When I finished, about the only difference in the way the two of us were dressed was that my top was a white tank top. I had been on automatic when I selected it and almost went back into my closet to find something a little less revealing, but Jennifer assured me that it looked fine.

I had thought that Jennifer had been dropped off at our house, but there was still a car in the driveway - a yellow Mustang GT.

"This is yours?" I gasped.

"For turning sweet sixteen," she said with a laugh, unlocking the passenger door for me. "It's used - a '96 - but the insurance alone on it must be costing Daddy a fortune."

"What does your Dad do?" I asked, admiring the car. In my previous life, I had rated a company car, but it was always something like a cheaper Taurus. I would have killed for this car.

"He's president of a bank," she said. When she saw my expression, she grinned. "That's right - I'm a rich bitch."

"I didn't mean - "

"Don't worry," she said, still grinning as she got in the car, "just kidding."

I didn't ask where we were going. Jennifer obviously had a plan of action in mind though. Well, I thought, Ovid was a small town. Wherever we were going, it wouldn't take long. I was right. Minutes later, we pulled up in front of a small but neat building which billed itself as the Ovid Public Library.

"What are we doing here?" I asked as we got out. Jennifer hadn't said anything about studying together. I had several assignments to do but had planned to work on them later.

"You plan to see the Judge again next week." It was a statement – not a question.

"Did I tell you that?" I blurted out.

She shrugged. "To be honest, I don't know if you did or not. But once the shock wears off, that seems to be everybody's first impulse. We're here so you can learn for yourself why that isn't a very good idea."

"But I won't be going alone," I pointed out. "Brooks is going with me."

"Brooks? You mean your mom?"

"She's not really my mom. You know that."

"I'd say in her present frame of mind, she'd probably side with the Judge."

I didn't reply, but I knew she was probably right. Brooks was becoming more and more a woman with each passing hour. Why I couldn't say, but the change seemed to agree with her. Her. It was hard to remember that she had been a man and my best friend. I had sneaked a look at her driver's license. Rachel Hiroshi Yamamoto was her full name. She was thirty seven - about four years younger than she had been as a man. And she seemed to be satisfied with all of that - being a wife and a mother. My mother, I thought with a shudder.

"Come on," Jennifer said, motioning me to follow her. "You need to get some answers."

"Why can't you just tell me?" I asked, following her nonetheless.

"It's not allowed," was her answer. "Remember the taboos?"

Maybe it wasn't allowed, but she nodded for me to walk down one of the brightly lit aisles. Looking at the shelves, I saw they were filled with books on mythology - mostly Greek and Roman myths. Sighing I picked up a book at random and began to leaf through it.

I wasn't particularly slow, but I'll admit that like many people, I hadn't read mythological tales since I was a boy. After an hour, I was putting most of the pieces of the puzzle together. When Jennifer joined me, I asked quietly, "Do you mean to tell me that the Judge is really J... J..."

"Save your breath," she told me. "You can't say it. It just isn't allowed. And as I told you, you can't even talk about the nature of Ovid with more than one other person. That isn't allowed either. But I wanted you to know what you'd be up against if you see the Judge again."

I was quiet as we walked out together. Once outside, I sat down on a bench. I knew when I was licked. It was one thing to try to face down a sorcerer, as I had thought the Judge to be. That would have made him at least human. But if the Judge was really Jupiter, that was another matter entirely. In the library, I had read many stories about Jupiter. In them, he turned people into nearly everything imaginable - animals, plants, whatever. Sometimes he did it as a punishment, and other times, he did it to escape discovery of one of his many affairs. Occasionally I think he did it just for the hell of it. There weren't many tales where he changed his victim back though.

I guessed I fell in the punishment category. I had never considered myself a bad person. I couldn't help it if I was uncomfortable around Japanese people. I might not have liked them, but I didn't wish them ill. I never hit one or insulted one to his or her face. I simply avoided them. Was that so bad? Was that so evil?

But of course, what was bad or evil to a god? From what I had read, Jupiter and his clan had done a few unsavory things themselves during their long lives. The concept of evil probably didn't enter into their thinking. Instead Brooks and I had proved to be subjects of our

transformation not because of our prejudices as much as because of our folly in flaunting them. If left unchecked, our own stupidity would have cost us our lives. Those lives were now forfeit.

So here I was, sitting on a bench in front of a small town library, breasts on my chest and a vagina between my legs because of my own stupidity. I felt a tear trickle down my cheek. It was a tear of mourning - mourning for the death of Allen Ripley, a foolish man who had never existed - except in my mind. I was going to be a girl – an Oriental girl no less - for the rest of my life. I was going to grow to womanhood in skirts and heels. If I wanted children, I would have to bear them. If I wanted sex, I would have to...

No, wait. That wasn't true. I could be a lesbian, couldn't I? No, I thought, looking at Jennifer. If a girl as beautiful as Jennifer couldn't get my motor running, I was not going to be much of a lesbian. But that didn't mean I was going to spread my legs for the first boy who asked - or even for the hundred and first. Just because I was stuck being a girl didn't mean I was interested in boys... was I?

My thoughts went back to Friday at school. While talking with other girls, I was part of their boy watching exercises and evaluation discussions. It hadn't been that hard to participate. I had even found that I could admire a boy's butt. Oh, a certain amount of it was pretending, just to seem like one of the girls, but I had noticed a couple of boys...

Then there was... what was his name.

"Luke!"

That's right, I thought - Luke Meecham. But why was Jennifer calling his name?

"Hi, Jennifer. Hi, Trish," a familiar male voice called.

I looked up quickly, wiping my eye in embarrassment as Luke strode up to us.

"Are you okay?" he asked, looking at me in concern.

"I...I'm fine," I told him, jumping to my feet. "I just got something in my

eye."

"Oh...oh, okay," Luke mumbled. The poor guy was so nervous around me that he didn't know what to do. In spite of my funk, I was almost tempted to laugh. I knew what he was going through. When I was a boy in high school, I managed to get tongue-tied every time I talked with a cute girl. And that's what I was, I reminded myself grimly - a cute girl.

"Hey Luke," Jennifer said impulsively, "Barry and I are going to the movies tonight. Would you and Trish like to come along with us?"

"Huh?" Luke and I said at the same time.

"Well," Jennifer said as innocently as she could to me, "I thought since you were new here, you might want to meet some nice boys. Luke here is as nice as they come. Why, if I weren't dating Barry..."

Luke looked at me hopefully. "Would you... would you like to go to the movies with me?"

No. I had to wash my hair. I had to feed some goldfish - after I bought them. My mother didn't like me to date boys she hadn't met. Aw, shit! "I... I guess I could."

Luke's face brightened. "Great! I'll see you tonight then."

As he walked away, I thought he would trip over his own feet, but then I realized he was probably floating an inch or two above the sidewalk. The poor klutz hadn't even bothered to find out what time to pick me up. Oh well, Barry and Jennifer probably had the details. Speaking of Jennifer...

"What possessed you to match us up?" I said between clinched teeth when Luke was out of earshot.

Jennifer gave me one of her wicked grins. "What possessed you to say yes?"

I blinked, startled. What had possessed me to say yes? Every conscious fiber of my being told me it was gay to be dating a boy. I wasn't a girl -at least not a real girl. I mean, I was a girl, but I wasn't...

oh what the hell!

"You have to start some time, kid," Jennifer told me with a dainty pat on my shoulder. "Looking back on things, I wish I hadn't fought against it so hard. Since I started dating Barry, life's been a lot more tolerable for me. I wish somebody had done for me what I just did for you."

I thought about Brooks. Was that what he had decided on his own? Maybe it did make sense to just roll with the punches. Ovid was in some ways like a prison, and Patricia Yamamoto was my personal cell. It could be a cold, harsh prison if I made it that way or it could be a velvet-lined one if I cooperated and became the good little girl the gods wanted me to be.

"So you're saying I'm stuck here and I might as well learn to like it," I said softly as I sat back down on the bench.

"Something like that," Jennifer said with a more sympathetic smile as she sat down next to me. "Trish, you remind me of me. You have that same fire. Maybe it's because we were both in competitive sports. Or maybe it's because I suspect the Judge set you up to fail and this is my way to get back at him."

"Get back at him?" I repeated. "You mean for changing you into Jennifer?"

"It's a little more complicated than that," she sighed. For the next few minutes, she told me her story. She told me all about their averted plane crash and the Jennifer she had originally been. She had been older when first transformed - she and Barry both. But they had helped lead an abortive rebellion against the Judge - one which had permanently changed some of the rules in Ovid and left her and Barry too young to be of much consequence.

"I'd probably still be a rebel if it hadn't been for Mom," she concluded. "She taught me there could be joy in this new life as well as frustration. Even though she had been a man before, she showed me it was possible to take charge of my life - not by rebelling but by coping. To be honest with you, I'm still more comfortable in jeans than I am a dress, but I suspect that's true of a lot of women."

"Yet you wear makeup and lean on Barry's arm," I pointed out.

"Yes I do," she agreed. "That's because I'm a young woman. I may not always like that, but I've learned to live with it. That's why I don't have a lot of girl friends, I suppose. I may have to look and act like a girl, but I guess I don't always think like one. And as for Barry... well, in some things, the body rules the mind. I'm... well, let's just say I'm very attracted to Barry."

"So how is helping me part of all of this?" I asked her bluntly. "It seems that by befriending the new girl - a Japanese girl at that - you're setting yourself apart from a lot of your contemporaries."

"Oh, they'll come around," she assured me.

"I don't know about that. They all seem to look at me as if I just arrived from another planet," I argued.

"And you think that's because they're prejudiced?"

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Trish, have you ever lived in a small town?" she asked, looking directly into my eyes.

I shook my head.

"Well, let me explain something to you," she began. "Most of the kids in our school grew up together - or at least they think they did. They believe they've known each other since they were just out of diapers. You could have come in here as a blonde beauty queen and they would still treat you the same way - until they got to know you."

"Guys aren't that way," I pointed out.

"Yes they are," she replied. "They just have other ways of breaking into the crowd. They have sports. If they're good enough, they're accepted almost at once. Of course, there are girl's sports here, but as I've told you, the coach doesn't want anything to do with any girl who didn't start under her as a freshman. So you're stuck. I think that's why the Judge did this to you. He wanted you to feel isolated. He wanted you to feel as if people were prejudiced against you because of your

race. That's what I meant when I said he set you up to fail."

I saw where she was coming from. It was a subtle punishment if ever there was one. Sending me into Ovid as a stranger of a race which the denizens of Ovid had only limited contact with was designed to make me feel an outcast. It had certainly worked. If it hadn't been for Jennifer... well, I didn't even want to think what the last couple of days would have been like without her.

"So you still haven't told me why you're helping me," I said.

"Let's just say I don't like to see the Judge get away with this," she replied. "I know I can't openly defy him. And I know I'm going to be female for the rest of my life. But I'm not going to do it on his terms; I'm going to do it on mine. And I don't like what he's doing to you. For that matter, why did he do this to you? Do you have any idea?"

Uh-oh. Here it was. I'd have to tell my story. When I was finished, she'd know I was Japanese just because I didn't like them. She'd think I was some sort of a bigot. Well, wasn't I? In the short time I'd been Trish, I had come to realize that all I wanted was to be treated like a normal American girl. But everyone wanted to treat me as if I was a foreigner due to the color of my skin. Yet I had always treated people of Japanese ancestry to not really be Americans. How downright stupid of me. "Jennifer," I began, "you may not like this, but here it is." I told my her my story, leaving out nothing. I plowed ahead as I saw her brow furl and her head shake. I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was about to lose my one and only friend in Ovid. Still, I looked at her hopefully as I finished my tale. I was trying hard not to cry.

"You poor kid," Jennifer whispered.

"Poor kid?" I echoed. "Jennifer, I just told you I was a bigot. That's why this was done to me. It's probably what I deserve."

"Maybe," she allowed, "but if the Judge changed everybody who felt like you into another race, I don't think very many people would be the same color. Take me. When I first got to college, I was still telling racial jokes. I grew up in a town so white I don't think I'd ever said more than a few words to a black person in my life. Suddenly, it

seemed like half the guys I was playing football with were black. I can tell you that my attitude changed in a hurry. A couple of the blacks became good friends of mine. And you know what the funny thing was?"

I shook my head.

"Once I got to know them, I found out they had gone to predominantly black high schools where they told white jokes."

I came out of my funk long enough to laugh. "You're kidding."

"Nope. So maybe you needed a little whack along the side of the head, but I don't think you deserve to be miserable for the rest of your life."

"Then I guess I'm going to have to make the best of it as Trish," I concluded. "But what can I do to get everyone to accept me as just another American girl instead of some sort of illegal alien?"

"I need to think on that," Jennifer told me, rising to her feet. "And when I think, I need to shoot hoops. Come on."

In a matter of minutes, we were in the driveway of Jennifer's impressive house, shooting baskets. Jennifer was pretty good at it, but it took me about twenty shots before I got a feel for how strong - or rather how weak - my new arms were. Once I got the hang of it though, I wasn't all that bad. It had been a long time since I had played high school basketball, so it wasn't as if I had to unlearn a lot of recently used techniques.

"Not bad," Jennifer commented as I sunk one from about twenty-five feet out. "Nothing but net."

"Thanks," I replied with a grin. It was actually fun to shoot baskets with Jennifer. I felt almost normal again.

"In fact, you're probably a pretty decent athlete," Jennifer said, sinking a shot of her own. "You were pretty good in gym yesterday and -"

She stopped at once, a wide grin on her face. "I've got an idea!"

I hadn't even heard her idea and already I had an uncomfortable

feeling. She was so into her idea that she let the basketball bounce off the concrete drive and into the grass.

"Trish, how would you like to be a cheerleader?"

I laughed nervously, but when I saw that Jennifer wasn't laughing with me, I asked, "You're kidding, right?"

"No, listen!" she began enthusiastically. "Cheerleader tryouts are next week. Not very many girls signed up this year, so you'd have a good chance."

"First, I'm not interested in being a cheerleader," I told her, having a sudden unsettling vision of my new body in a cheerleader's outfit. Besides, why would I want to become a juvenile male's fantasy girl? Isn't that what cheerleaders were? "And even if I were, those cheerleader selections are always just popularity contests."

"Maybe when you were in school," she allowed, "but there's more to it now. A committee made up of parents, students and teachers selects now."

Jennifer went on to explain the process. Apparently only juniors and seniors could be cheerleaders, so the competition would be among sophomore girls who would replace the outgoing seniors. Four girls would be selected. And apparently things had changed from my high school days. Oh, attractive girls were still the chosen few, but they had to have some athletic talent as well. And with more sports opportunities available for girls in modern high schools, there were fewer candidates for cheerleaders - particularly when some athletic talent was required for the job.

"Don't you see?" Jennifer asked, barely able to contain herself. "This is the answer to your problem of fitting in. Once they see how athletic you are - and how cute you are - you'll be a shoe-in. And you have to admit, as a cheerleader, you'll fit in. What's more American than a cheerleader?"

She had some good points, but I still said no. I wasn't about to don a skirt so short that my panties would show on every whirl. I wasn't

about to stand out in front of a crowd cocking my head and waiving pom-poms with a stupid smile on my face. The whole idea was ludicrous, and I told her so.

"At least think it over?"

"All right," I agreed, but I had no intention of thinking about it any further.

Jennifer let the subject drop. It was just as well. I was getting a little steamed about the whole idea. We shot a few more baskets and then she drove me home so I could eat dinner and get ready for my date with Luke.

"Just wear something casual tonight," she advised me. "I'm wearing shorts. The guys will, too. And don't worry about tonight. It's just a movie and a coke afterwards. Nothing to worry about."

It was easy for her to say, I thought to myself as I forced a happy wave and headed into my house. Jennifer had had plenty of time to get used to the idea of dating. By her own admission, she had fended off every boy in the school during her first months as a girl. now she was expecting me to start dating only a couple of days after my transformation.

What had possessed me to go along anyway? Deep down I was still male - at least in my thoughts. But those thoughts were mainly memories, I realized grimly. The fact of the matter was that I had just spent the better part of the day with a very attractive girl, watching her breasts and hips move around as we shot baskets and noticing her slim legs as she walked her sexy walk. The problem was that while I could recognize things like that for what they were, they failed to turn me on.

Now that isn't to say that the converse was true. Watching guys walk around with their natural swagger hadn't done much for me either - yet. The problem was that I was beginning to notice little things about guys that I had never noticed before: the jut of their chins, the gleam in their eyes, the movement of their muscles under their shirts...

Stop that!

"Did you have a nice time, dear?"

Those words greeted me as I walked in the door. Why oh why was she taking this Donna Reed role so seriously?

"Fine...Mom."

She smiled at me from the kitchen entrance. "See? That wasn't so hard, was it?"

I looked around. "Are we alone?"

"Ralph is still with his new friends," she explained, "and your father had to go to the hardware store to get some picture hangers and shelf paper. I'm afraid dinner tonight will have to be pretty simple since I haven't found everything I need for the kitchen yet."

"Look, Brooks..."

"Mom - call me Mom." She turned back to the kitchen counter where she was chopping some vegetables. "I found a nice supermarket here. It's called Duggan's. It's not a huge store like back in Detroit, but it's nice. And guess what! Remember that attractive blonde who was sitting in the courtroom? She lives right down the street. Her name is Cindy Patton and her husband manages Duggan's!"

"Brooks - 'Mom' - will you stop playing happy housewife for a few minutes? We need to talk."

She turned and gave me a look that was so motherly I found it downright chilling. "Certainly, dear. Is there a problem?"

I waited until we were sitting together on the living room sofa before beginning. I hardly knew where to start, so I just blurted out the ultimate question. "You don't want to change back, do you?"

She gave me a wan smile. "No dear, I don't. I never thought I'd say this, but I like being a woman. I guess like a lot of guys, I've always been curious about what it would be like to be a woman. Oh, I was upset at first. What normal guy wouldn't be?"

"But you sound as if you just said you had some sort of repressed desire to be a woman," I pointed out, scarcely believing what I was hearing.

"I don't mean it in that way," she explained. "I never wanted to dress in women's clothes or have a sex change. But I will admit I've always been curious. Women always seem to know themselves better than men do. When I was a man, I wasn't particularly happy. It's hard to explain, really. I don't mean I didn't enjoy being a man. It's just I felt as if there was something missing."

"It seems like there's something missing now" I commented wryly.

"Have you looked between your legs lately?"

"Trish!"

"Sorry."

"Anyhow," she went on, "when I was changed, I was as upset as you were. All I wanted was to be changed back into myself - my old self - again. Then I got to know Don. I was so wrong about Orientals. I always thought they were cold and calculating. But Don isn't anything like that. He really loves me. I mean, he loves all of us, but he loves me. I never felt that much love before - even when I was married. My wife and I started yelling at each other practically

before the wedding was over. But Don is just... well, he's...you know what I'm trying to say."

A real lover? Great in bed? A tiger between the sheets?

She sighed. "I guess he's just a great guy." She looked up at me. "I think I can be happy here. So can you if you just let it happen."

To my dismay, I actually understood what Brooks was telling me. It really wasn't so bad in some ways. I had my youth to live again. There was no ugly divorce and a pack a day habit in Trish's life. There were no aches of approaching middle age, no getting up every morning wondering what city I was in. But I was a girl, damn it! And a Japanese girl at that. Well... Japanese by ancestry at least.

"So you won't see the Judge with me."

She shook her head. "I don't see what good it would do. Do you?"

"Because you've decided you like your new life," I concluded.

"That's part of it," she admitted. Then she went to a bookshelf and pulled down a book for me to see. It was the Edith Hamilton book on mythology. I had just read part of it at the library. "I assume you know what's in this?"

I nodded silently.

"Then you know we're up against great power here. If Ju... if the Judge wants us to be who we are now I'd say we're stuck."

"All right," I agreed reluctantly. Actually, I had already come to the same conclusion. It just bothered me to see Bro... Mom reveling in her new life. Maybe I would be better off if I learned to do the same. "I'll play it your way...Mom."

She smiled happily. "Oh Trish, it will be fun. I know you don't think so now but it will. now what would you like for dinner? I've started a salad."

I shrugged. "I don't know. Just something simple. I have a... I mean, I'm going out to the movies with some friends."

There was a sly look in her eyes. "A boy?"

"Well, Jennifer and I are going to the movies with a couple of her friends. And yes, they're boys," I replied, trying everything I could to make that night not sound like a date.

She grabbed my hands. "Trish, that's great! See? You're learning how it should be here."

Actually, I felt like crying. This was my best friend - or at least she had been my best friend. Now she wanted to be my mother. It was as if Brooks was dead. Well, I suppose in a way that he was. We both were. We should have died back in that bar fight that never happened.

"Look...Mom...don't get carried away. It's just a movie. It's not as if I'm going to...well, you know. I'm not going to be doing anything."

She gave me that knowing mother smile I remembered from my real mother in my previous life. "Fine," she said, as if she really hadn't heard me. "Why don't you go ahead and get ready? I'll make dinner without your help tonight."

Something told me I'd be spending a lot of time in the kitchen in the future.

I was picked up at a few minutes before seven. Seven had been the agreed-upon time, but I was glad they were early. I had been getting progressively more nervous about the evening with each passing moment. I kept trying to tell myself this wasn't really a date. It was just four teens going to the movies together. What could be more innocuous?

The problem was I knew Jennifer and Barry were an item. Jennifer tried to downplay it as much as possible. She had told me that she and Barry were friends in their original lives, and since Barry remembered who he had been, that made them still "just friends." That might have been true from Jennifer's viewpoint - although I doubted even that - but Barry was certainly in love with Jennifer. I could tell it just from the way he looked at her and the way he gently put his arm around her every moment he could. Jennifer, I noted, never protested, and I could tell from the contented smile she got when Barry touched her that he had become more than just a friend. I don't think they were sleeping together, though. I suspected someday the two of them would go the altar together with at least a fifty-fifty shot at being virgins - in their current bodies, that is.

So that left me with Luke. What were we supposed to do while the two lovebirds gazed into each other's eyes? I could remember a double date or two back in high school or college where the other couple got downright embarrassing. And I could think about a few where my date and I were the couple trying to get it on. Would I just sit there uncomfortably with Luke while Barry and Jennifer made out right in front of us? Would Luke try to put the moves on me?

I had tried not to look too sexy for the date. I even considered wearing jeans even though I knew the others would be wearing shorts. The

problem was that it was actually quite warm for a spring evening, and I knew I'd be too hot and look odd in jeans. That was the last thing I wanted - to look odd. So I wore shorts, but the loosest pair I could find. Then I changed them. Somehow, they made my hips look too big. So I went on automatic.

Big mistake.

When I finished, I was one hot looking little thing. There I was in a lemon yellow tank top, jeans shorts, and a pair of wedge sandals that arched my heel up displaying my slim, golden legs. I had laid on the makeup a little thick, giving me a little of the Dragon Lady look. Framed by my dark hair, I looked like a real Oriental flower. In fact, I looked too good. I thought about changing, but knew I wouldn't have time to wash off all the makeup and start over with my clothes. I would just have to be beautiful but unapproachable.

"You look fantastic!" Luke said as I met him at the door.

"Thanks," I replied, trying to look pleased. The odd thing was that I really was pleased - at least a little bit. "You look great, too." That just sort of spilled out of my mouth. Of course, it was the natural thing to say, and besides, he really did look great. Like most boys in high school, he had been a little grungier, a little baggy really in his attire at school. As the old saying goes, he cleaned up real nice. He was wearing a polo shirt, khaki shorts, and sandals, and he looked as if he had just stepped out of the pages of an Eddie Bauer catalogue. I found him strangely... attractive.

Barry was driving Jennifer's car, so Luke and I had to squeeze into the back seat of a Mustang. It wasn't too difficult for me with my newer, more diminutive size, but Luke with his basketball player's height had a hard time contorting himself in a seat that had obviously been designed for double amputees. I found his arm loosely draped around me but said nothing. Where else was he supposed to put it? He even had to duck his head a little. Again, what could I say if he had to be staring down a little at my breasts?

I have to admit I had fun. The movie was okay but not terribly

memorable. It was a typical Julia Roberts romantic comedy. I had taken my own dates to a number of them over the years, but I found I still preferred action films. I did realize that I was projecting myself into the character Julia Roberts was playing instead of one of the male characters. Somehow, that made the film more enjoyable. I wondered to myself if that was why women preferred romantic comedies to action films. There were so seldom strong women to project into in action films. Mostly, I began to realize, women in action films were there to be drug out of danger by the virile hero. They were seldom well-developed characters.

And yes, Luke had his arm around me. I just thought it would make more of a scene to protest. Besides, it wasn't as if he was gripping me possessively. I actually found it a little comforting in a different sort of way. I suppose I didn't have to snuggle up against him, but it just felt right.

After the movie, we went out for a coke. Apparently, Rusty's Burger Barn was the biggest teen hangout in town, for there were twenty or so teens doing the same thing we were doing. I got some curious stares as I walked in. I looked down instinctively to see if my fly was closed - as if that was an issue now. Why were they staring at me?

Then I realized why. Sure, I was new in town - that was part of it. But looking into the Caucasian faces of my friends, I had forgotten for a while that I was now seen as a foreigner by many of the town's residents. I don't think they meant it in a bad way, but I think they were wondering why a clean-cut American boy like Luke would be walking in holding hands with that Japanese girl. I felt like yelling out to them that I was every bit as American as they were, but I didn't.

With nothing more than a perfunctory waive to the other teens, we took a table near the back of the room. Luke sat very close to me – closer than he needed to - but that was all right with me. It gave me more of a sense of belonging.

"That's a neat car your dad got you, Jennifer," Luke said to start the conversation after we had given our drink orders. "But why did he get you a yellow one?"

Before Jennifer could answer, I told him, "That yellow was a special color for the GT's in 1995."

"So that's the only color they came in?" Barry asked.

I shook my head. "No, you could get them in any of the Mustang colors, but that yellow and a sort of purplish blue were the two exclusive GT colors."

"So that's got the 4.6 liter engine," Luke concluded.

"Not in '95," I told him. "The '95 models had a 5.0 liter engine. I actually like it better than the..."

Luke was staring at me. "How come you know so much about Fords?"

My eyes narrowed, giving them I'm sure a particularly Oriental look.

"Oh. You think I should just know about Hondas and Toyotas because I'm Japanese?"

Luke reddened. "Oh God no, Trish. I just meant how come you know so much about cars?"

"You mean how come a girl knows so much about cars," Jennifer clarified sweetly.

Luke turned even redder. "Man, I stuck my foot in it that time."

Actually, I was about as embarrassed as he was. I had taken an innocent - if sexual - comment and construed it into a racial comment. Any boy who treated me the way Luke had treated me was hardly a racist. "Oh. Well, I've just always liked cars," I told him, ignoring the other remarks.

"Really?" he said brightly. "Me, too. I've just... well, sorry, Trish. I've just never known a girl who could talk about cars."

Things went pretty smoothly for the rest of the evening. The only other blemish on the night was as we walked out. Duck and his friends had staked out a table near the entrance. Under his breath, I could hear Duck muttering, "Oh so sorry! Me new here." His half-wit friends chuckled but the four of us just ignored him. I had to gently nudge Luke ahead though, because he stiffened as if he wanted to defend

my honor.

"Assholes," he muttered when we were safely outside.

"It's okay," I told him as I squeezed his hand. I was a little afraid he'd get steamed up and go back in and confront Duck and his pals. I didn't want to see Luke get hurt on my account. Even with Barry's help, they'd be outnumbered since Jennifer and I wouldn't be much help.

"Duck's mostly just talk," Jennifer explained as we got in the car.

"But it hasn't always been that way," Barry pointed out. "Before Bull got hurt in that game, dropped out of school and had to get married, that was a pretty tough bunch."

"I've taken Duck down before," Luke said defiantly.

"True," Barry allowed. "But he was alone then. And I wouldn't be much help to you against two of his friends. Besides..." He looked at Jennifer with a grin. "...I'm a lover - not a fighter."

Jennifer giggled and playfully punched his arm. "Barry!"

To my relief, there was no long make-out session in the country. Barry's little joke had gotten me very concerned that the next stop might be a dark country road. Instead it looked as if the evening was over as we pulled up in front of my house.

Luke helped me out of the car. There we were, touching again. What was I supposed to do now? Did every girl worry about that as she was dropped off on a first date? Probably, I realized. To kiss or not to kiss - that was the question. I knew from my own high school experience that boys went through the same trauma. But a fair number of years had gone by since I was in high school. Was I expected to kiss him? Part of me hoped not, but part of me was curious about what it would be like.

"I had a great time tonight, Trish," Luke said shyly at the door.

"Me, too," I replied, equally shy.

Luke finally made his move. He leaned down and at the same time put his arm gently around me. Our lips met - softly, almost chastely. I

could smell his after-shave and wondered what my lips tasted like to him. I could feel a faint quiver between my legs and wondered if he felt a stirring I would have found more familiar. I even closed my eyes.

Then, in a moment, it was over. Our lips parted and his arm was no longer around me.

"Well, good night," he whispered.

"Good night," I whispered back with a smile.

As I turned, he asked, "Uh...can I call you tomorrow?"

Of course you can, you big dummy. I just let you kiss me - remember?

"Sure."

I closed the door behind me with a sigh, but whether the sigh was one of relief or contentment, I really couldn't tell. What was happening to me?

"He looked nice."

It was Brooks - Mom - sitting there on the couch in the dark.

"You're still up?" I asked softly.

"Sure. It's not that late. Besides, I had to see how you made out – no pun intended."

I sat down next to her so we could keep our voices low enough to not wake Dad or Ralph. "It was... different."

"But fun?"

I thought for a moment before answering. "Fun? Yeah, I suppose it was."

"He kissed you." It wasn't an accusation. It was more of an amused statement.

"Just a little one."

"Did you kiss him back?"

"Well, yeah, I suppose I did." Damn! She was really enjoying this. After the crap I gave her about the way she was acting around Dad.

"Good," she said, surprising me by not rubbing it in. She put a motherly hand on my knee. "Then go ahead and get to bed. Your father wants us to go to church tomorrow."

"Church!" I groaned. I hadn't been to church in years.

"Yes, church. It's a small town, and people go to church on Sundays. Now good night, young lady."

Somehow, the "young lady" didn't gall me as much as it had earlier. "Goodnight, Mom."

There was something almost natural about getting ready for bed. I hadn't felt it on either previous night, but as I slipped on a set of rather feminine pajamas, I didn't seem to find anything particularly odd about them. In fact, I noted to myself as I slipped under the covers, even in a short period of time, being Trish had begun to feel almost natural. Oh, I still missed being the real me, but I was already starting to ignore the sway of my breasts and the tickle of my long hair. Was that part of the magic of this place? I wasn't sure. All I was sure of was that I was warm and comfortable and I had had a very nice evening, even if it had been marred by Duck's racial comments. I fell asleep with the image of Luke's face in my mind.

I woke up the next morning - Sunday - without being called. It was the first morning since my transformation that I awakened with the full realization of who I now was. There was no half-asleep confusion as to why there was hair in my face or why my chest felt so funny - or why I seemed to lack any sensation in my penis.

"Good - you're awake." Mom smiled at me from an open door. "Don't forget - we're going to church today. Will you need any help with your pantyhose?"

"My what?"

"Pantyhose. You'll need to wear a dress. There's a pretty lemon yellow dress in your closet. Try that with white pantyhose and shoes."

I sighed as she closed the door. I might be able to wake up without confusion, but a dress? Well, I had worn one Friday, I told myself. But

the dress Mom had picked out for me had a very short skirt. I supposed I had to dress like that some time, I rationalized. I was sure she had picked it out for me just because it was short and would require pantyhose. At least I had made it nearly three days into my new girlhood without wearing the damned things.

Again, having been married once, putting on pantyhose proved to not be too much of a problem. I did it very slowly just to make sure I didn't get a run. The rest of the outfit was no problem either. I even picked out jewelry and did my makeup with a minimum of going on automatic.

"You look very nice, dear," Mom commented when she saw me at the breakfast table. I had to admit, it was getting easier and easier to think of her as "Mom." The way she acted, it was as if Brooks had somehow checked out, leaving only this attractive woman behind.

Was the same thing happening to me? I wondered as I ate my breakfast. This girl stuff was getting to be second nature to me. I still thought about being a man and I still would have given everything I owned (or rather that Allen had owned) to get my masculine identity back. But I was growing more and more comfortable with my new identity with each passing hour.

Jennifer had certainly been a big help with my level of comfort. And I had to admit that Luke had helped, too, although he had no idea of it. I found my growing attraction to him both natural and pleasant. I had expected to have guilty feelings of being gay or something, but when I looked like I did and Luke looked like he did, who could call what I felt for him gay?

Church, however, was something of a disaster. It was the same old story. While everyone was pleasant and friendly, several people asked at least one of us how we liked the United States. A couple expressed surprise that we were Christian, as if to be a Baptist, you had to have round eyes and any color skin but yellow. All of us were in a little bit of a funk as we headed home.

"I wouldn't mind it so much," Dad said, "if it wasn't for the fact that you kids are the fifth generation of our family to be born in the United

States."

"Fifth?" I asked, surprised.

He went on to explain that the first generation of our family to come to the United States had left Japan at a time when the Japanese government had declared that no one who left the country could ever return - upon pain of death. It hadn't been easy for them. They were farmers, and although the valleys of Central California could support crops they were familiar with, they had not been welcomed by their new neighbors. At last, the family had moved off the farm, settling in Fresno where they ran a grocery store.

"That was your great grandfather's idea," Dad explained to us. "There was a growing population of Japanese in Fresno, and he thought the family would be more comfortable surrounded by other Americans of Japanese ancestry."

Things had gone well for the family until the Second World War.

"I found your grandfather's scrapbook," Dad said to us. "It was stuffed into one of the boxes I was unpacking yesterday. I want to show it to you."

When we got home, we gathered around the kitchen table while Dad reverently spread the aging scrapbook in front of us. The book told a tale of the trials the Yamamoto family went through during the war. I knew, of course, that the history was fabricated by the same magical forces that had created Ovid, but it was nonetheless compelling. Even if the events hadn't actually happened to my imaginary ancestors, I had little doubt that similar things had happened to others.

"This is your grandfather when he was about six." Dad pointed at a black and white picture of two young Oriental boys in front of a store. Both were handsome, happy boys, although one was apparently quite a bit older than the other. Painted on the glass of the store were the words "Yamamoto's Market." He was a handsome, happy little boy. "That's the store your great grandfather ran until the war. This next picture is him at ten."

The boy in that picture was still a handsome lad, but there was a more somber look on his face. In the background were buildings that looked like barracks, and beyond them a vast, open plain.

"This is the camp our family was sent to after Pearl Harbor," Dad explained. "It was in Wyoming. That's where your grandfather met your grandmother."

"Who was the other boy in the first picture?" Ralph asked.

"That was your grandfather's brother, Yoshi," Dad told him. "When it was finally allowed, he joined an all-Japanese division that fought in Italy. He was killed at Anzio Beach."

Mom and I had said nothing as Dad told the history of the Yamamoto family. I don't know about Mom, but I was beginning to think the Judge had let us off rather lightly. We had been "punished" by being made a part of a proud family - a proud American family. Sure, we were both female. Mom seemed more at ease with that than I was. But the point was that we were as American as any family that had ever come from Europe. Or Africa, I thought. No one asked American blacks if they had just come from Africa. So why did so many assume that most Asians weren't native Americans?

I changed into shorts, still pondering what I had learned. The family had been left practically destitute after the war. The store was gone - expropriated after the forced move to Wyoming. So apparently, my great grandfather had started a new business from scratch. He moved the family to San Francisco since there was a larger concentration of Japanese-Americans there. Apparently the hatred of everything Japanese was still intense right after the war, so there was safety in numbers.

And in my previous life, I had helped perpetuate that hatred in my own small way. I looked at myself in the mirror. There was the face of a pretty girl - a pretty American girl no matter where her ancestors had come from. Wasn't that what they had taught us back in school? That America was a melting pot. That it didn't make any difference where you came from or what you believed in, once you put down stakes

here, you were an American.

It was then that I felt tears forming in my eyes. I don't know if they were tears of frustration or if I was just feeling sorry for myself. Whatever the cause, I had to do something and do it quickly or I was going to be "that Japanese girl" for a long, long time.

Fortunately, I had a plan.

Jennifer was curious. She had dropped by as people in small towns tend to do. We had ended up over at her house. I finally met her mother. Like Brooks, she was very confident in her womanhood. The subject of her transformation never even came up. I found myself very comfortable around her. It was easy to see how she had been able to help Jennifer accept her new life. Shortly we found ourselves laughing and talking as we drank Diet Cokes on her back deck.

"So what was it you told me on the way over that you wanted to talk about?" she asked when her mother had retreated to the house.

"Answer this for me, Jennifer," I began. "No matter what I say or do, I'm stuck here in Ovid as who I am now. Is that correct?"

"As far as I can tell," she answered, eyeing me curiously. "Every now and then the Judge modifies people who piss him off - like making me younger. But you can't even leave Ovid unless you accept who you are. If you leave, you'll just wind up coming into the other end of town. I know; I tried."

"So I'm Patricia Yamamoto until I die."

She grinned. "Or get married. If Luke asks you, you can be Patricia Meecham."

If looks could kill...

"Okay, sorry. And yes, you will be Patricia Yamamoto for the rest of your life."

I sighed. "Okay then Jennifer, you win. I'm going to try out for cheerleading."

Jennifer's mouth dropped open. "Wait a minute Trish, I thought about

what you said. You're right. Being a cheerleader isn't such a hot idea."

"Sure it is," I argued. "Okay, so you wear a skirt so short your butt shows. So you're every pimple-faced boy's sex fantasy. It's still a form of athletics, and it's still an easy road to popularity."

"Since when have you been worried about being popular?"

"Since I've gotten real tired of being considered some kind of alien life form," I replied. "If I've got to look like this, I want to be treated like a normal high school girl. I want a little respect. I don't want to have to keep explaining why I'm not Buddhist or what the weather is like in Tokyo or where my grandfather was when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. If I'm a cheerleader, I'm one-hundred percent certified American in everyone's eyes."

Jennifer was silent for a moment. Then: "Okay. I see your point. And I've seen you in action in gym class, so I know you can do it. You just need to learn a few cheers for your audition."

"Do you know any of them?"

"Hey, I go to all the games," she laughed. "Here, let me show you."

We spent the next two hours practicing Ovid High School cheers. We even modified a couple of them to display my gymnastic talent. I hadn't been too sure of myself at first, but after two hours of intensive cheers, I was well aware of what my new body was capable of doing.

I collapsed in a heap, exhausted and my throat a little rough from the cheers. "God, I don't know if I'd last through an entire game."

"Don't worry," Jennifer laughed, collapsing beside me. "What we were doing was a lot more intense than what cheerleaders do. They take a lot of breaks, you know. I don't think any of them could do as many strenuous routines as we have."

It was my turn to grin. I had another bright idea. "Jennifer, come out for cheerleading with me."

"Right," she snorted. "The rich bitch cheerleader. I don't think so."

I grabbed her by the shoulders. "No, I'm serious. Think about it."

You've always regretted not being able to play for one of the girl's teams. And you love athletics. Together, we can turn the cheerleading squad into something any gymnast would be proud to be on."

"But I've never wanted to be a cheerleader," she protested, but I could see she was starting to consider the idea.

"Do you think I have?" I returned.

"Good point."

"So what do you say?" Years of practice negotiating had taught me one thing. If you keep asking for the result you want, the person on the other side of the table can say no fifty times, but that's all wiped out when they say yes once.

"I don't know..."

She was weakening. I could sense it. "Hey look, you told me yourself how some of the people here think you're just a rich bitch. Isn't this a way to prove them wrong?"

"How?"

"Well," I reasoned, "you said yourself there's nothing that says All-American girl like a cheerleader." Actually, that isn't exactly what she said, but I was counting on her not remembering exactly what she had said. It was close enough that it struck home. "Wouldn't being a cheerleader change you from rich bitch to All-American girl?"

"I..."

"Jennifer, we're wasting time we could spend practicing. Just say yes."

She never said it, but she managed a small nervous smile and a nod of her head.

So we spent the rest of the day practicing. Jennifer had a fairly good knowledge of the high school cheers. And what high school student who had attended the games wouldn't? It was helpful to me though, because I had never heard those particular cheers before. Suddenly, we really got into it. We were inventing new, complex routines that would blow them away at the auditions. After three more hours, we

were exhausted but happy.

"Even I didn't know I could do cartwheels," Jennifer laughed as we rested on the grass of her back yard.

"Double cartwheels, no less," I noted.

"I still think your twist and flip is more impressive," she laughed. "I can't see myself ever being able to do that."

I sobered up for a moment. "Jennifer, do you think we can do it? I mean, I still can't believe this isn't a big popularity contest."

"Normally, you might be right," she agreed. "But as I told you, not many girls are going out for cheerleading this year."

"Why is that?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? As I told you, a lot of girls are in sports now. And I do have to admit I've never seen a girl picked for cheerleader who wasn't pretty darned cute. That cuts the field, too."

She dropped me off at my house after agreeing to pick me up in the morning. We were going to sign up for cheerleader auditions the first thing since the cutoff was Monday at noon.

I spent the rest of the evening studying. Well, I did take a break to talk on the phone with Luke. But that was just for a few minutes. Well, half an hour or so, really... or more like forty-five minutes. He was actually excited that I was going out for cheerleading. He reminded me that since he was on the basketball team, the football team and the track team, that meant we'd be able to see each other at all the games. Somehow, that seemed all right with me.

By the time I went to bed, I was actually looking forward to going to school on Monday. What a change from Friday when I couldn't wait to get out of school. Maybe this new life wasn't going to be so bad after all.

So when I got up Monday morning, it was as if I had come to terms with my new life. I showered and dressed quickly, even putting on my makeup with little help from the magical automatic mode. I was

cheerful at breakfast, laughing and talking with Mom as if she had been my mother all my life. I was even nice to Ralph, in a sisterly sort of way, giving him a little kiss on the cheek as I left the table. Of course, that was more to annoy him than anything else.

As I was gathering my homework for school, Mom came into my room. "Trish, did the fairies come by overnight and replace you?"

"That's called a changeling," I laughed. "And no, although I suppose that would be a good term for all of us when we meet the Judge. I just decided if I have to be a girl for the rest of my life, I'm going to do it on my terms."

I told her all about Jennifer and what we had decided to do. Needless to say, she was surprised.

"Cheerleaders?"

"Is there something wrong with that?" I asked, putting my book bag down on my bed.

"Well, no," she chuckled, "I suppose there isn't. But from what I know about you and what you've told me about Jennifer, it sounds a little out of character for both of you. I can't imagine you wanting to twirl around in short skirts. Do you remember back in our male days the idea of cheerleader fantasies?"

"Oh, Mom!"

"No, I'm serious," she continued. "Are you sure you aren't just playing out some leftover male fantasy?"

"There's more to be a cheerleader now than there was when we were in school," I argued. "It's not just bouncing around with pom-poms. It's the only way for Jennifer and me to do anything athletic at the school since the women's coach only wants incoming freshmen to join the teams. Besides, what better way to fit in here? I don't plan to spend the rest of my life being 'that little Japanese girl.'"

She leaned over and gave me a hug. "In that case, Trish, I hope you get selected - you and Jennifer both."

"Oops! There's Jennifer. Got to go!" I gave her a little kiss on the cheek and scrambled out of the room, still attaching my book bag.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Jennifer asked as I closed the car door. She was obviously having second thoughts.

"Don't think we're good enough?" I asked innocently.

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh, we're good enough. In fact, we'll probably be the best ones there. It's just..."

I looked at my new friend. "It's just that after fighting this girlhood thing for so long, becoming a cheerleader looks like the ultimate surrender."

"Well...yes."

"I would have thought the same thing a few days ago," I told her. "But I honestly believe that success is the best revenge. If we sit back and just act like part of the pack, then the Judge and his cronies have won. We've been punished. I don't think that it's any act of whimsy that keeps the women's coach from considering upperclassmen as new team members. If she isn't one of the Judge's people, she's been programmed to act that way. It's to make sure people like us are frustrated."

"You may have a point," Jennifer acknowledged. "I've often thought at least some of the shades are programmed to act in ways that challenge us."

"Shades?"

"Oh - the transparent people," she explained. "I guess an obscure meaning of the word is 'phantom,' although that isn't really what they are."

"Just like we're changelings," I muttered.

"Us? Changelings? I like the sound of that," she said with a smile.

I explained to her what a changeling really was, but that didn't deter her from liking the word. I suppose just as the shades aren't really shades in the strictest sense, we could be considered changelings. I had a hunch I had just coined a new term in Ovid.

In spite of my resolve, I almost backed out when it came time to sign the list. It was posted on the school's main bulletin board – a location that was always busy. I lost count of the number of guys who kept looking over my body, concentrating on my breasts and legs. I was beginning to regret wearing a tight top and shorts. This was the way it would be for me if I became a cheerleader, I realized. I would be on display.

Then I realized that I would be on display no matter what. I was an attractive girl, and my Oriental features only served to make me more exotic. Unless I bundled up in unattractive clothing and covered my attractive face with a ski mask, I would always be on display. It was something I supposed all attractive girls just learned to live with.

"You first," Jennifer said, handing me the pen.

"Nope. After you." I handed the pen back. I half expected her to back out if I signed first. She sighed and signed, muttering, "I hope you know what you're doing."

"What we're doing," I corrected her, taking the pen and signing my own name.

"Well, well, look who wants to be a cheerleader."

I didn't have to turn around to realize it was Duck. But I did turn around, facing his sneering expression. "Maybe you and your friends should sign up, too," I told him sarcastically with the full knowledge that all of Ovid High's cheerleaders were female.

To my satisfaction, Duck's face became red. His two friends turned red, too. Score one for my side.

"You think just because you're a girl, I won't pound on you?"

"It wouldn't be good for your image," I pointed out confidently. I suppose that was one advantage of being a girl.

"Maybe not, but I don't think either you or your rich bitch friend have any business being cheerleaders. You might want to reconsider your decision or..."

"Or what, Duck?" Jennifer chimed in.

"Well," he said with a malicious grin, "I might not be able to give either of you the lesson you deserve, but your little Jap friend here has a brother who might learn it for you. And it would be a shame if that pretty car of yours had any problems."

"You're threatening us?" I asked incredulously.

"So what are you going to do about it? Go tell the principal? A fat lot of good that would do you."

I suspected he was probably right. High schools were a jungle in their own way. Threats were made all the time, but the authorities were reluctant to act on a threat alone. Something could happen to Jennifer's car and Duck and his friends would have an alibi to prove they were nowhere near the car. Ralph could end up getting a beating but it would be chalked up as a typical dispute between two boys.

I was beginning to wonder if Duck had something to do with how few girls were trying out for cheerleader. I had noticed that on the already-short list, two girls had scratched out their names. For some reason, he wanted the list kept short.

Duck and his friends turned and left without another word. They had made their point so there was nothing left to be said.

"Assholes," Jennifer muttered, but I noticed she said it too quietly for them to hear.

"Do you think they meant what they said?" I asked her, suddenly worried for Ralph.

"Yes, and now I can tell you why," she said. She pointed to a name on the list: Millie Adams.

"So? Who is Millie Adams?" I asked. "His girlfriend?"

"No such luck," Jennifer said. "Adams is Duck's last name. Millie is his younger sister. In her own way, she's meaner than Duck. And I guess her mother is the Queen Bitch of Ovid. She's probably pushing Millie to be a cheerleader and told Duck to keep the competition under

control."

"Oh surely not," I protested. "It can't be that important for them."

Jennifer shook her head. "You must not read the papers. Stuff like this happens all the time. Remember that mother in Texas who plotted to kill a girl who was competing against her daughter to be a cheerleader? They even made a TV movie about that."

"Sure, but those were real people," I insisted. "These are shades."

"Shades like your dad or your brother?" Jennifer shot back. "Look, if you haven't figured it out already, the shades are as real as us. I don't know if they have free will or are programmed to be assholes like Duck, but whatever the reason, they act like real people. And you know they're as solid as real people. That also means they can be just as dangerous as real people."

I didn't take her seriously at that moment, but as I waited the next couple of days for cheerleader tryouts, I began to see what she meant. Since most of the people I came into contact with were shades, it didn't take long for me to realize that programmed or not, they were really people. In fact, I really stopped noticing their slight transparency after a while.

Teachers, students, family and friends - each group contained shades. And of course, there were shade enemies as well. Dad and Ralph were certainly the shades I came into contact with the most. I was beginning to feel as if Dad really was my father. And Ralph? Well, he was the typical little brother. Sometimes I felt as if I could kill him, and other times I loved him. Even at his worst, I hated to think what would happen to him if Duck decided to get back at me through him. It was almost enough to make me back out of the whole idea of trying out.

And speaking of Duck, he and his friends were making it a point to intimidate Jennifer and me. When we'd come out of school, Duck and his friends would be leaning against Jennifer's car. Duck would pretend to polish up the door with his sleeve before moving away from the car to let us in. Even worse, Duck or one of his friends would often stop and talk to Ralph. The conversations were innocent, as Ralph

told me, but the idea was there - namely that they could get their hands on him whenever they felt like it. I didn't tell Ralph what was going on. I was afraid it could frighten him.

I saw a lot of Luke over those two days. I even invited him to come and watch me try out for cheerleader, but he and Barry had a track meet that day. How they were able to leave town and participate in a track meet was beyond me. Jennifer told me that according to Barry, the Ovid team participated in events normally, but after the meet was over and everyone had gone home, none of the other teams or their fans had any memory of the Ovid team. All I could do was shake my head. The magic of Ovid was so immense that I was happy I hadn't confronted the Judge after all.

I was nervous from the moment I got up on Wednesday. It was time for tryouts, and I was as nervous as a turkey on Thanksgiving morning.

"Quit worrying," Jennifer said as we were limbering up for our turn. "Nine girls have signed up. I figure you and I will have no trouble with the competition."

"So how do you rate Duck's sister?" I asked, stretching out a leg muscle that was cramped up from sitting in class all day.

She shrugged. "Fifth or sixth out of nine."

"Slim chance?"

"No chance," she replied. "Dana Porter and Marsha Hammond are both a lot better than her. And then, there's us."

I peeked out onto the stage to catch a glimpse of the judges. I recognized a couple of my teachers, and the attractive fortyish woman sitting next to them had to be Dr. Miner, the Superintendent of Ovid Schools. Jennifer had told me that she was one of the Judge's associates - probably Minerva I reasoned.

There were a few students sitting with the teachers, and I figured they had to be the upperclassmen designated to vote on the new cheerleaders. And then there were the parents. I couldn't recognize

any of them, but I was sure that was who they were. But suddenly I noticed another figure sitting next to Dr. Miner. It was the Judge!

Now what the hell was that bastard doing there? I wondered. Maybe he was there to gloat. Here I was, a former man who had a strong dislike for Orientals in general and Japanese in particular. Only now I was an attractive, diminutive girl of Japanese ancestry who was trying to become every red-blooded American boy's fantasy - a cheerleader. How he must be laughing inside!

But maybe he had figured out why I wanted to be a cheerleader. Maybe he wanted me to remain forever an outsider. Maybe he was there to influence the vote away from me. "Is this the image we want for our high school?" he might be saying. "A little foreign girl - a Japanese girl no less representing our American school?" No, he wouldn't be that blunt (although the old me might have been); he'd be subtle, but the results would be the same.

So which was it? To vote me down or to gloat? Vote: gloat. How ironic that they rhymed.

Perhaps another person might have gotten frightened; I just got mad. His presence increased my resolve. If he was there to gloat, I'd show him that his punishment had failed. I might not have wanted this new life as an Oriental girl, but I damned well planned to make the most of it. And if he tried to stop me? Well, I'd just have to be so good during the tryouts that the selection committee wouldn't dare turn me down.

"Places, everyone!"

That was from Mrs. Lovelace. Although a shade, she was supposedly a former cheerleader and professional dancer. Since she had two sons and no daughters, she relived her youth by volunteering to be the volunteer coach/den mother for the cheerleaders.

We all formed up on stage in a single line. Dressed as we were in an assortment of spandex, sports bras, and leotards, we looked like escapees from an exercise video. My own black leotard looked pretty sexy against my golden skin. Come to think of it, black and gold were the Ovid High colors. Maybe it was a fortuitous choice.

Mrs. Lovelace put us through several group routines that were standard cheering fare. They were the same cheers Jennifer and I had practiced, so I knew them well. Unfortunately I didn't do as well as I would have liked. The girl on my right was a little clumsy. She was cute enough with her long brown hair swinging back and forth and her spandex shorts displaying a firm body, but she wasn't terribly well coordinated. A couple of times, she moved at the wrong moment or started to turn the wrong way. Unfortunately this threw my timing off a little.

I still felt I had a good chance, though. One girl had actually slipped and fallen while another was having trouble remembering the routines. And those were just the ones I managed to notice on my turns. Besides, it was the individual performance that I felt would put me over the top.

"Did you see Dana Porter?" Jennifer asked me in a whisper as we waited for our turn.

"No. Which one was she?"

"She was the redhead on my left," Jennifer said in awe. "She was poetry in motion. She does her individual routine next."

"I'll have to watch," I promised. "Who was the brunette on my right?"

"Oh, that was Millie Adams," Jennifer told me. "She did okay. She might have had a chance if it wasn't for us." She gave me a confident grin. That was just for my benefit, I realized.

They took us in the order of the signup sheet, so Jennifer and I were last. There was some stiff competition, I realized as Jennifer went out on stage. Dana Porter had wowed the committee, and Marsha Hammond looked like a natural. Even Millie Adams had turned in a pretty decent individual performance. But Jennifer and I were competing for what would be effectively two spots since Dana and Marsha were obvious choices - and Millie would have to be better than us. Barring a serious mistake on my part or Jennifer's, Millie would be out of the running.

Jennifer's athletic talent came through. She wasn't as graceful as Dana or Marsha, but the routine she showed the panel was a more difficult one, requiring considerably more agility than either of the frontrunners had shown. She got a big hand as she left the stage. I had no doubts about Jennifer - she was in.

"Knock 'em dead, kid," she said to me as I checked myself over. I thought I looked pretty good. I had taken special care with my makeup, enlisting Jennifer's help. My lips were full and red and my eyes had been outlined to make them look if anything even more Oriental. I was shooting for the Mysterious East look. When first changed, I had been almost ashamed of the shape of my eyes, but now I had accentuated them and was actually surprised at how lovely they were. My long dark hair was clipped back into a loose ponytail - tight enough to stay out of my face but loose enough to swirl seductively as I moved. I sighed. It was now or never.

"And our last candidate is new to our school - Patricia Yamamoto," Mrs. Lovelace announced, almost tripping over my last name.

I had designed my routine to emphasize both grace and athletic ability. Maybe it came from being a man before, but I knew what looked good and I emphasized those moves. The challenge for our individual routines had been to rework an existing cheer into a new and complex routine. It would demonstrate both our original thinking and talent at the same time.

I carefully checked my footing on the tumbling mats that had been laid out for this portion of the tryouts. They were a little uneven, but I could work with them. It was a simple routine really, but it took advantage of the flexibility of my body. It was one of those inane chants of "Who's gonna win? Who's gonna win? Who's gonna win this game?" For that part of the routine, I just made the standard moves any cheerleader would make. But then...

"O!"

As I yelled out the letter as loud as I could, I tucked and rolled, leaving my body rigid enough as I rolled to form the letter "O".

"V!" I yelled, dropping on my ass and lifting my legs and torso in one fluid motion until they formed a straight-line "V".

"I!" I belted out next as I jumped to my feet arms extended straight up.

"D!" With that letter, I dropped to the floor, torso straight with my legs bent back and my head and arms arched back as well, hands touching feet from the back in an effective letter "D".

Before rising, I twisted at a ninety degree angle facing my audience, jumped to a crouching position, rolled while springing into the air and came down in a perfect split.

"Ovid!"

For just a fraction of a second, there was stunned silence. But then, the audience broke into a loud cheer as they clapped for my performance. It was the most boisterous ovation of the day. The grin on my face was genuine. I knew that barring any interference from the Judge, I had made cheerleader.

"That was incredible!" Jennifer said when I got backstage.

"Oh, you saw me do it at your house," I said modestly.

"True, but you gave it an extra effort today," she gushed. "I don't know if I made it, but I know you did."

I smiled at her. "We both made it - I'm sure."

All the other girls were quick to congratulate me as well - all except Millie. She just gave me a cold, hard stare and stormed off. She might have been a bitch, but she knew when she was beaten.

Our joy was short lived though. When Jennifer and I got back to her car, Duck and his friends were waiting for us. They were standing next to Jennifer's car which now sported a long, deep scratch in the yellow paint.

"What have you done to my car?" Jennifer screamed.

"Us?" Duck said in mock innocence. "It was this way when we got here."

There was a snicker from the Stupid Twins behind him.

"You bastard!" she growled, raising a fist as she approached Duck. "I know you did this."

Her fist did no damage. Duck caught it, enveloping it in his own massive paw. For emphasis, he twisted it backward.

"Ow!" Jennifer screamed as he released her. I could see the frustration in her eyes. In her former life, she could have probably handled Duck easily. Now for all her athletic ability, she still had the strength of a girl.

"My sister tells me you two did pretty good today," Duck said conversationally. Then he moved menacingly close to me. "I thought I warned the two of you to forget about being cheerleaders." He was close enough to be that I could smell his foul breath. "Especially you, Jap. You got no business being a cheerleader. You need to go back to Japan where you belong. Maybe I oughta go talk to that kid brother of yours."

"You mean me?"

We all turned to see Ralph standing beside a nearby tree. Ralph had apparently seen us talking and came over to join us. He had no idea what was going on.

"Ralph, run!" I had visions of what they would do to my poor brother. And yes, I had come to think of him as my brother.

It was too late though. Duck's two friends each grabbed an arm on the surprised boy as Duck approached, fists ready. I knew I would fare no better than Jennifer had if I tried to stop him. She was nursing a sprained wrist now and showed no interest in being given another lesson about how weak she was. But Ralph was my brother - or at least he was supposed to be. I found I actually had feelings for the little twerp and I had to do something to help.

So I jumped Duck from behind, grabbing to hold his arms back, but he shucked me off as if I had been a loose cape, throwing me to the ground. For the first time in my life, I was happy to have a little more

padding on my butt, but it still stung. I tried to get up, but I knew I'd never manage it before Duck had buried his fists in my brother's stomach.

Then the unexpected happened. As I looked at Ralph, I saw the surprise in his eyes had turned to determination. He seemed to be steeling his body for something. At first, I thought he was trying to break loose - a worthless effort given the size of his two captors. Then I saw he wasn't trying to get loose at all. He was making sure he had sufficient support from Duck's two bozos - sufficient support to bring a leg up as his body twisted. An extended foot landed right in Duck's crotch.

For a moment, I thought a magical sex change had been performed on Duck, for a beginning cry of surprise suddenly rose an octave until it became a scream of agony. Duck's two henchmen were so surprised that they released Ralph. It was a bad move on their part. Ralph spun at once, another lethal kick slamming into one of the tough's knees. I heard a sickening pop as Duck's henchman fell to the ground screaming, his leg twisted in a painful direction. Then it was the other one's turn. Before he could bring his own fists up, Ralph struck him in the throat with a blow I thought would surely shatter the boy's windpipe. Ralph held back a little though, for as his would-be assailant dropped to the ground, he was still breathing, although with some difficulty.

Ralph helped me to my feet. The kid didn't have a mark on him. In fact, he hadn't even broken a sweat. He grinned. "And to think, sis, you laughed at me for all those Karate lessons. You said it was too much of a Japanese stereotype."

I smiled at him. For once, I was happy a Japanese stereotype had rung true.

"Well, isn't this interesting?" The voice was familiar. I turned to see the Judge standing there. "It seems I wasn't needed after all."

I looked back at the scene beside me. Ralph and his three assailants were frozen in place. They seemed completely unaware of the Judge's

presence. Only Jennifer and I were still moving.

"What do you mean - needed?" Jennifer asked, still nursing her wrist.

The Judge looked at her with sympathy. "Oh, my dear, that wrist must be causing you pain. Here, let me."

He touched her wrist and I could tell from her expression that he had taken away the pain. I was sure he could have done the same for the stinging sensation in my ass, but I had no intention of letting him fondle my rear.

"You knew this was going to happen." I hadn't asked him a question; it was a statement.

To my surprise, he smiled. "I suspected Duck and his friends might do something like this. Don't look so shocked. They may be shades as you call them, but they do have free will." He stopped for a moment.

"Or perhaps I should say that they have free will within the context of their identities. I wanted to make sure the two of you were safe.

Normally Officer Mercer would have handled the chore, but I was curious."

"About what?" Jennifer asked. The tone of her voice made it clear she had no love for the Judge.

"Why, as to why the two of you would choose to try out for cheerleader," he explained with another smile. "It seemed most uncharacteristic of both of you."

"Why do you care?" Jennifer growled. "If anything, you should be pleased. We've decided to be good little girls and go with the flow. now half of Ovid will be able to watch us jiggle."

"I suppose your reasons are your own," he admitted. "Perhaps though, there's more to the two of you than I first believed. I'll have to keep an eye on you." He nodded at Duck and his friends. "You seem to have an instinct for trouble."

"So what will happen to them?" I asked. Jennifer had told me there were stories floating around Ovid that shades had been changed as well as outsiders. If we had wished for that, we were soon to be

disappointed.

The Judge merely shrugged. "They will be expelled from school for a period of time. I doubt if it will teach them anything though."

"You aren't going to..." Jennifer's voice trailed off.

"Change them?" the Judge finished for her. "Whatever for? There are some things we will not tolerate. Sexual assault, for example. Or smoking."

He said it so seriously that I could scarcely believe it. Rape and smoking seemed to bear equal weight? He might look human, I realized, but he was not. None of his kind were; that seemed suddenly obvious to me.

With a final smile, he wished us well, flicked his wrist to release those he had frozen in time, and was gone. He didn't exactly disappear. It was just that he was no longer there.

Jennifer and I found out the next day that we had made the cheerleading squad. We were as happy as... well, as happy as schoolgirls. Barry and Luke even took us to Rusty's to celebrate. Mom was pleased, too. It became harder and harder to think of her as anything besides Mom, and I think she liked it like that. We've stopped discussing our former lives entirely. Maybe that's for the best.

As for Luke, well, I guess we're an item now. I don't know how long it will last, but I have to admit, he's fun to be with. As long as I'm stuck as a girl, I might as well date a guy with common interests. We talk sports and cars just the way Brooks and I used to do it. And did I mention that he's a great kisser?

Ralph is the new golden boy at Ovid High. Before he took on Duck and his friends, Ralph was just that strange little Japanese boy. now he's some kind of a folk hero around the school. Boys want to be his friend and girls call him up at home. The little twerp is going to be more popular than me!

As for Duck and his boys, they were kicked out of school for the rest of the semester. That meant they won't be able to keep up with their

classmates and move up. They were all marginal students to begin with. Most of my friends don't think they'll ever even finish school. Unfortunately that meant they'll probably be in some of my classes next year. Oh well, nothing is perfect.

I hate to admit it, but in the two weeks that have gone by since the tryouts, I've actually settled into a routine. It seems natural - actually pleasant - to be a girl. Jennifer is currently having her period, though, and she assures me being a girl won't seem nearly as much fun when I suffer my first bout with the cramps.

Maybe so, but when I look in the mirror each morning, I see an attractive, young face looking back at me. It just happens to be female and Oriental. And maybe that isn't so bad after all.

"So there's just one thing I don't understand," Susan began when I had come out of the trance.

"Only one thing in Ovid you don't understand?" Di said dryly.

Susan scowled. "You know what I mean. What I still don't understand is why Brooks accepted her womanhood so easily. Even if she had been curious about being a woman before, she accepted it almost at once. Most of us seem to take a few knocks before we accept it."

Di thought for a moment. "Are you familiar with the term 'transsexual?'"

"Sure," Susan said. "That's a person who wants to be the opposite sex. Are you saying Brooks had more than a little curiosity about being a woman? Are you saying Brooks was a closet transsexual?"

She nodded. "Yes, he was. Working in something as macho as the auto industry, he was careful to never let on. Even when she became Trish's mother, she downplayed her desires when she explained her curiosity about being a woman. Actually, it was a burning desire she never dared tell anyone."

"But he was as much a bigot as Ripley," I pointed out. "Why did the Judge reward him?"

"He didn't," Di explained. "At least not exactly. Brooks really did have a dislike of Orientals. It was drilled into him much the same way Allen's father and grandfather did to him. But he also secretly - desperately - wanted to be a woman. The Judge gave him a conundrum. He could be a woman but it would have to be an Oriental woman. What Trish didn't know is that Brooks did see the Judge on the Friday that she was in school."

Susan looked at me. "Hey, I didn't know!" I protested.

"No, you didn't," Di agreed. "She left her husband with the movers and saw the Judge while you were at lunch. She didn't even want an attorney there. Like many transsexuals, she didn't want others to know - including you, Susan. Most transsexuals never go beyond the wishing stage, and they take particular pains to make sure no one ever knows about their hidden desires."

"The Judge then gave her a choice. He would turn Brooks back into a Caucasian, but it would be a Caucasian man. He gave her twenty-four hours to make up her mind. If she had sex with her husband in that time, she would remain an Oriental woman. If not, she would be changed into a Caucasian man - still in Ovid of course, but a man, and Patricia's mother would be replaced by a shade."

"So her desire to be a woman was greater than her dislike of Orientals," Susan concluded.

Di nodded in agreement. "It became a matter of principle. He was denied what he thought he really wanted - to become a Caucasian woman. Brooks could either overcome his prejudices and remain a woman or stand behind his bigotry and be changed back into a man. You see which one he chose."

"A fitting challenge," I commented, admiring once again how absolutely diabolical my boss could be. "And with Trish, the prejudices apparently revolved around nationalistic feelings."

Di smiled. "Exactly. Her male persona saw Orientals as being excluded from what was truly American. Sadly, it isn't as uncommon a philosophy as you might think. Whites, blacks, and Indians all have

their heroes in American history, but who can name a famous Oriental in that same history? Just as Brooks considered it more important to be a woman than maintain her prejudices, Ripley felt it more important to be seen as an American than to fight coming to terms with his femininity. And what is more American than a cheerleader?"

There was a sudden cry from the baby's room. Then a second baby cried out. "Speaking of coming to terms with our femininity," I said, "I think two babies need to be fed."

Di's eyes twinkled. "This I have to see!"

Ovid XII: The Rescuer

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There is nothing stranger than watching a violent storm cloud build and knowing with absolute certainty that it is nothing to worry about. The cloud approaching Ovid was massive, boiling with shades of black tinged with green, completely hiding the afternoon sun. Distant rumbles of thunder were like heralds announcing the approach of a royal visitor, and the flashes of lightning were almost constant.

I was just coming out of March's Department Store when I saw the cloud. Most of the residents of Ovid were hustling about, one eye on the storm, certain that it was about to hit our town with its full fury. Of course, they didn't know what I knew—that the gods would never allow such harm to come to Ovid. We might get a 'gullywasher' as heavy rains were called in Oklahoma, but the winds would be no more than moderate and twisters would pass without incident.

There was going to be a serious early fall storm somewhere though, I realized. Although more common in the spring and early summer, September storms like the one approaching could be just as violent as those earlier in the year. This one might even cause a few deaths in its path—that is unless the storm's victims happened to stumble upon Ovid first. I turned away from the cloud and tried not to think about that.

I silently cursed that I had chosen to walk downtown, leaving my car parked back at City Hall. The Judge had given me the afternoon off since things were slow. I took advantage of the time to pamper myself. I managed to talk Bobby Sue into a last-minute appointment at M'Lady and then snooped around March's for something to go with my new look.

Walking had been an easy decision. I had worn comfortable shoes that day with just a low heel—good for walking. And I had plenty of time to shop and get back to the car to pick up Ashley at the sitters. I

needed to get back in fighting shape since having Ashley. I had never realized before how much strain having a baby could put on a girl's body. The things a woman has to do to look good! Of course, growing up male, I had never worried about it.

But I certainly wasn't male anymore, and in a way, it seemed as if I had never been. My previous life as a boy growing up back east and going to college at Notre Dame seemed like someone else's life. And I suppose it really was. I was the only one who even remembered that life.

I was starting to regret my ambitious walk though. I had only walked half a block when the rain began to fall. At first, it was just a light sprinkle, but I didn't want to waste a perfectly good trim and set at M'Lady, so I needed to find a port before the storm broke loose. Even though my heels were pretty low, I wasn't prepared to run in them. The choice was obvious. I ducked into the office entrance for the Farmer's and Merchant's Bank Building and walked the flight of stairs up to Susan's office.

Susan Jager and I hadn't seen much of each other lately. First, both of us had young babies to care for, and second, the work had been piling up for Susan while she had been out. The life of a lawyer in individual practice isn't an easy one—even in a small town. Plus, Susan's practice had grown steadily as her reputation as a competent attorney grew. It seemed as if the only time I got to see her was when she was defending someone before the Judge.

"Cindy!" a pleasant voice called out to me as I closed the office door behind me. "What a pleasant surprise. I just called over to the courts and they told me you had the afternoon off."

The speaker was a pleasant woman in her forties with mostly brown hair and a motherly smile. Dori Smithwick had been Susan's legal secretary since she had opened her office. Of course, Susan hadn't really opened the office. It was there when she was transformed. So I suppose in a way, Dori had been working for Susan since before there had even been a Susan. It all gets so complicated sometimes.

Dori had been a shade for most of that time, but a few weeks earlier, a poor girl strung out on drugs came to Ovid. Although the girl aged twenty plus years and lost all of her memories, she had made an excellent Dori. Given that the girl would have been dead from an overdose within a week, it wasn't a bad trade.

"I do have the afternoon off," I replied. I pointed at my hair. "See?"

"Oh, it looks great on you," she said with a smile. "Has Jerry seen it yet?"

Jerry was my husband, but once he had been my fraternity brother. As I said, it all gets very complicated sometimes. "Not yet. He's still at the store. But I told him I had the afternoon off, so he promised to come home early. I got a sitter and he's taking me out to Winston's tonight."

"Well, Susan is out taking a deposition right now," Dori told me. "But if you want to go on in, Myra is just setting out some files for her. I'll get you a cup of coffee while you wait."

I smiled. "Thanks."

Myra Smithwick—Dori's lovely daughter—was just finishing up when I stepped inside Susan's office.

"Hi, Cindy!" she greeted me brightly.

"Hi, Myra." Myra was one of the true success stories in Ovid. Formerly something of a bimbo, she had turned her life around. After spending a year as the girlfriend of one of the local high school jocks, she had dumped him, toned down her makeup and wardrobe, and buckled down to become a great student. In fact, she earned a scholarship to Capta College starting in the fall and had plans to go on to law school.

Those who didn't know the inner workings of Ovid considered it a small miracle. They would be surprised to know they were right, but not for the reasons they thought. Myra had once been as male as I had been, and her determination to escape from the life the Judge had given her had come from outside the persona Myra had, before a transformed road worker had been given her life.

“So how are you and your mother getting along?” I asked her quietly once I had closed the door. I’ve always been a little curious as to how much of a person’s old self survives the transformation. I can’t quite bring myself to believe that all of the old personality is lost, even though the memories are taken away and replaced with more appropriate ones.

“Great,” she replied. “Of course she doesn’t remember who she was before.”

I nodded. That wasn’t uncommon. The majority of transformed people lost all knowledge of their former lives. They were like my husband and my twins and believed they had always been the people they had been transformed into.

“Still, I wonder,” Myra added. “Every now and then she does something or says something I wouldn’t have expected from her. She even acts a little younger sometimes. Do you suppose even the people who don’t remember who they were retain just a little of their old selves?”

“I’m not sure,” I answered honestly. “But I’ve suspected that might be the case. It seems a shame to lose all of your old identity.” Although there was a time when I might have envied them, I thought. It was very unnerving to find myself suddenly transformed into a woman. When I was changed, I had gained not only a few years in age but a husband and two children as well. It might have been easier if like them I had thought that had always been my life. But of course if that had been the case, I would have missed out on a lot of excitement in Ovid.

“Well anyhow, she’s still mom to me,” Myra concluded. “How’s Ashley?”

“Doing fine,” I said with a smile. “I have to pick her up at the sitters in a little while. I just thought I’d duck in out of the rain and see Susan for a minute.”

“What? It takes a rainstorm for you to come and see me?”

I hadn’t heard the door open since the rain was now making quite a

racket. I turned and saw Susan looking very wet but happy to see me.

"I can see why you ducked in here," Susan said, laughing as she gave me a sisterly hug. "I like your hair that way. It would have been a shame to ruin it in this weather."

"Thanks."

Before we could say another word, lightning seemed to hit the side of the building. A bright flash nearly blinded us, and when our vision cleared, there was a very lovely woman—apparently Hindu from her sari and caste mark—standing in front of us. She smiled at us, her dark brown eyes twinkling, and made a little bow with her palms pressed together before her.

"And a good day to you," she said in the singsong voice of an Indian princess. She reminded me a little of Apu's wife on *The Simpsons*. Then she looked up at the sky and called, "Thanks for the ride, daddy!"

It was, of course, Diana. Someday she was going to run out of new identities, I thought to myself. In the time that I had known her, I had never seen her in the exact same body twice. Yet every body she chose was uniformly beautiful. This one was more exotic than most but certainly no exception.

"Been in India?" I asked.

"Yep," she replied with a grin as the Indian accent disappeared. "I had a long visit with my old pal, Shiva."

"So the Hindu gods are real, too?" Myra asked. Diana had allowed Myra the same privileges Susan and I enjoyed—the ability to speak freely of the gods. I was pleased because Myra, despite her youth, had become a good friend as well. Since she had started working part time for Susan, I had gotten to know her well. She had even appeared at Susan's side a time or two in court. Of course, in our previous lives, Myra would have been older than me, so I suppose it all averaged out.

"Sure, but I'm not supposed to admit that," Diana said, the grin still in

place. Diana would usually tell us about anything—except the purpose of Ovid. When it came to that, she could be as reticent as any of the other gods or goddesses who flitted in and out of Ovid.

Diana was a frequent visitor to Ovid, preferring to live elsewhere. I was not sure if she really called anyplace home, though. I had actually been expecting her visit. She always seemed to know when something unusual had happened in Ovid and timed her visits accordingly. Myra, Susan and I even had a little running bet going as to which case would attract Diana next. Myra had actually won the last round, so Susan and I had to buy her lunch. I had missed out when I had predicted she would show up to hear the story of a married couple who had strayed into Ovid and had their sexes reversed while remaining married. Apparently, that was just too mundane for Diana. She had preferred to hear about a travelling salesman who had ended up as a three year old girl—not one of my favorite stories, to be honest.

“I suppose you want to hear about the escape,” I ventured hopefully. That had been my current bet in the pool.

“Of course,” Diana replied as Myra and Susan sighed. They’d have to buy me lunch. “It’s not every day something like that happens. Daddy usually keeps better control of things.”

“Maybe it’s because your father is a couple of thousand years behind on technology,” Susan suggested.

“Well, he hasn’t exactly needed it before,” Diana pointed out. “So start the story already.”

“Okay,” I agreed, leaning back and relaxing in one of Susan’s big leather chairs as I allowed myself to drift into my trance...

My cubicle felt like a prison. Oh sure, I could get up and go to the bathroom or the break room pretty much any time I pleased, but my cubicle would always be waiting for me. It imprisoned me from the heat and sunlight of a bright Dallas summer day. It reminded me that it differed from my Spartan apartment only in size. It isolated me from

my co-workers. It bored me to death. But when you got right down to it, it was all I had.

I tried to concentrate on the stream of data that was advancing slowly up my screen. That way I could forget just how empty my life was. I could fill it with data. I could try to tell myself I was contributing to the greatest advance in software since Microsoft had developed Windows—although there were some who would probably argue that Windows wasn't that significant an advance.

But I knew in my heart I was just another cog in the great machine. Software magazines didn't come to interview me. Sure, I got offers from other firms, but so did every other programmer. If I left Aldeberan Netware, I'd just be replacing one cubicle for another. And I wouldn't know anybody at another company. Of course, I barely knew anyone at Aldeberan for that matter. Hell, my supervisor could scarcely remember my name. He called me Jack about as often as he called me Jeff.

Yeah, that was me—Jeff Bradshaw—programmer by trade and nonentity in the pattern of life.

I suppose when you get right down to it, I had brought it all on myself, I thought. I had always been a loner. It wasn't as if I could blame that on someone else. Sure, I had been an only child, but my parents had lived in the same house in Topeka, Kansas, since I was seven, so I had every opportunity to make friends and keep them. Maybe if there had been someone close to my age in the neighborhood, I might have turned out differently, but there wasn't. Oh, there were a couple of guys down the street who were three or four years older than me, and there was a girl in my class just a block away, but no one I could call a good friend.

The Pattersons next door to our house had a little girl who wanted to be my friend, but she was three years younger than me and I wanted nothing to do with her. Now I regretted ignoring her. She was a runner-up for Miss Kansas a few years ago—or so I heard. On the other side of our house were the Skinners. They had no children and proclaimed with pride that they never wanted kids. I was a constant

annoyance to them. My boisterous play in my own yard seemed to annoy them. My parents asked me to keep a low profile so as not to bother them.

I think that had something to do with my attraction to the computer. I could play with my little Atari and not disturb the Skinners. Besides, I didn't need any friends when I was on the computer. My world became defined by the size of my monitor.

It was only natural that in college I would study Computer Science. I was very good at programming and soon developed a reputation for being something of a whiz at anything that involved a computer.

So how had I ended up in a dead-end job when I showed so much promise in school? I don't really know. No, that's not true. I did know. I just couldn't relate to people. In fact, I still couldn't. I barely knew the programmers in the cubicles on either side of me. Oh sure, I knew their names and we worked together on projects, but I didn't really know them. It wasn't that I was unfriendly. And I would have liked to have known Kathy Reynoso better. She worked in the cubicle next to mine. She was very attractive and I would have liked to know her much, much better, but I was too shy. Besides, I was probably not her type. I wasn't a bad looking guy, but I had never been able to do very well with women.

I looked up at the clock. It was only two, so I had at least four more hours to go. It wasn't that I had a large amount of work to do, but programmers were expected to put in long hours. If I left at five like a normal person, my workaholic supervisor was sure to know. He might not remember my name, but he'd remember I left early. What was the old saying about programmers? It was something to the effect that the best way to manage them was keep them in a cage and feed them raw meat.

Well they had the cage part right, I thought, looking around my cubicle aimlessly yet again. As for the raw meat... well, no such luck. I did have a Payday candy bar in my desk drawer, but that was for later. It was something to munch on until I got home to another frozen pizza.

Determined to stop feeling sorry for myself, I cast about for something to do. There was always my email. Maybe there would be some inane requirement from HR or something which would occupy my time. Anything to keep from gazing at strings of code. At least the company was pretty liberal about email. I could get my personal email forwarded to the company servers and read it at work. Not that I got a lot of personal email, but I suppose it was the thought that counted.

I had ten unread messages. Good—there were a couple from HR. Human Resources was always running one study or another, or telling us about some exciting new benefit like free checking at a credit union in Mongolia. The rest were just boring stuff. But one caught my eye. There was no sender listed, but the subject line read ‘Your Best Friend.’ It had to be an ad, I thought. Maybe it was some sort of sex aid. I’d have to stop surfing through those X-rated sites. They were finding out where I lived.

Or maybe it was some sort of new virus, I thought suddenly. In spite of the anti-virus protection and firewalls and all that happy shit the company had invested in, I’d hate to be the one to unleash a powerful new virus into the system, even though the computer I was using wasn’t tied to the research system. Well, I had to depend upon our tools and assume that if it was a virus, it would have been detected. With confidence, I pressed the key to retrieve the message.

What I saw on my screen seemed to be directed at someone else since the message began as if I had known the sender all my life. In fact, I had never heard of the sender before. I checked again. No, it was my email address and my name. Someone had to be playing a cruel trick on me, I thought. But who? Frankly, none of my co-workers were close enough to me to make it worth their while to pull such a stunt on me. My curiosity was piqued. I pulled a container of fruit juice I had forgotten about out of my desk drawer and settled back to read what appeared to be a very lengthy message...

From: (Sender Unknown)

To: Jeff Bradshaw, Aldeberan Netware

Subj: Your Best Friend

Jeff, I know you're going to think I'm nuts, but I'm not. Even though you've probably never heard of me I'm—or at least I was—Andy Skinner, your best friend. Now before you press the delete key figuring you've got some sort of loony writing you, hear me out. It's sort of complicated.

Remember back in Topeka and you were a kid? Remember the Skinners next door—or at least I hope they moved in next door. They probably didn't have any kids as you remember, but they did have one—me. They didn't want me; they never wanted kids, but accidents do happen and mom wasn't the sort to submit to an abortion, being Catholic and all. The result was me.

By the time we moved in next door to you, I was twelve years old. I hadn't exactly had the happiest childhood in the world. My parents never missed an opportunity to tell me how I was a big accident and how much simpler their lives would have been without me. Oh, they were never cruel enough to say it that way, and they kept me clothed and well fed, but they made it obvious they just tolerated me because they were supposed to. So by the time we moved next door to you, I was a wreck.

You weren't so much yourself, pal. I remember the very first time I saw you. You were tall and skinny and looked pretty nerdy. I was the cool one. But I envied you. God, how I envied you! I might have been a better looking and more athletic guy, but you had parents who loved you dearly. I would have given anything to have been in your shoes.

I think that's why we became friends when you get right down to it. I gave you something you'd never had before. I gave you self-confidence. When we were together, you seemed to come into full bloom. You laughed more, carried yourself better, and appeared to be a normal guy and not some nerd. I don't mean to hurt you with these comments. You and I talked about this many times as we got older over a bottle or two of beer. I wish you could remember that.

In return, you gave me something I had never had before—a real family. Your mother... honestly, Jeff, I thought she had to be the most beautiful woman in the world. I would have done anything for one of her smiles. And then there was your father. He went fishing with you and took you to ball games, and when we became such good friends, he took me along, too. I had never experienced anything like it.

And then there was you, Jeff. You were the brother I never had. I could talk to you... tell you things. Do you remember back in...? Oh, no. Of course not. You wouldn't remember when I told you back in our junior year of high school how much I loved Beth Ann Mitchell. I'm sure you remember her, though. I had managed to get her out on a date and just fell for her. I told you all that. I poured my soul out right in front of you. Then when she wouldn't have anything to do with me, it was you that told me Peggy Winters was hot for me. I promptly forgot about Beth Ann thanks to you.

And I was there for you, too. I'm the one that coached you on how to win Suzy Norton when we were in college together over at KU. I hope when reality shifted it didn't take Suzy away from you. If it did, I'm really sorry, Jeff, but it wasn't my fault.

Okay... I probably lost you with that comment about reality shifting, didn't I? Now you know you're reading something written by somebody who's one cherry short of a hot fudge sundae. Well, maybe I am. There are times when I wake up and think I must be out of my mind. I'm not Andy Skinner. Andy Skinner never looked anything like this. In fact, there never was an Andy Skinner, was there, Jeff?

I'm sure you're completely confused now. Maybe I should leave out all the personal stuff about you and I being friends and get on to what happened to me. Then it'll be up to you to decide if this is a true story or just the ramblings of a madman with email. I'm really banking on the fact that the Jeff Bradshaw I once knew was a very curious guy. No matter how strange or bizarre something was, you wanted to check it out. Remember when you thought our high school physics teacher was in contact with aliens? But no matter. On to my story.

It starts with a road trip. Dave Malloy, Connie Hancock and I were all

three on our way to an install at Vulman Industries. Since you don't remember the players, Connie was our sales rep for the Southwest Region, and Dave and I were the techs sent to install the network at Vulman—Connie's new account. Did I mention we all worked with you at Aldeberan? Well we did.

You and I used to always say if we were single, we'd be fighting it out to see who got Connie. She was really sharp—short dark hair and a sweet face and a body that would make every tech in the office fall silent when she walked through the place. Dave was single, and he loved to go out on installs with Connie. Not that it did him any good—Connie couldn't see him that way and Dave was too shy to make a good move on her. It was funny to watch.

And it wasn't as if Dave was a bad looking guy. Actually, I had heard more than one girl back in the office say they wished he'd ask her out. He was about your size—six feet and maybe a little more, decent build and a shock of unruly blonde hair that endeared him to folks in smaller towns—like Ovid.

I was asked to go along because the Vulman install was going to be a pretty good sized one and we wanted it installed and tested in a couple of days. I don't know how well Vulman is known outside of Ovid, but apparently they're an important defense contractor and they make parts for Ford. They have a sales office in Washington and another in Detroit that somebody back there was installing on the network. Needless to say, their system had to be state of the art and secure enough to connect with DOD and other government agencies, as well as Ford.

The hardest part was finding Ovid. For some reason, it didn't appear on any of the maps, and when we rented a car in Tulsa and asked about the town, no one at the Avis counter had even heard of the place. It was apparently a common problem—or so we had been told. The people at Vulman had bought the system by coming to Dallas to handle all the paperwork. They had warned us that due to a cartography error, Ovid had been left out of the databases. They provided us with a hand-drawn map so we could reach the town

without difficulty. Of course, it wasn't until later that we learned the truth.

"This road isn't even here according to the Gousha Atlas," Connie commented.

We were driving on some state highway—two lanes and winding through forested hills. It was actually sort of a pretty drive. I needed it to relax. Dave had been driving all morning and nearly pulled out onto the interstate right in front of an eighteen-wheeler. Time had stood still for us, but the trucker had made an amazing swerve, barely missing us. How he was able to keep from hitting us seemed like a miracle. It wasn't until later that I realized just how much of a miracle it really was.

"It seems to be the right road according to this map they drew for us," I said after we had calmed down from our near accident. I had practically memorized the crude map. "There's no highway number on the map, so I can't be too sure."

"It's the right road," Dave told us confidently. "Look."

He was right. There ahead of us was a commercial sign welcoming us to Ovid, and as we crested a small hill, we could see the town laid out before us. There was nothing unusual about the town from a distance. It just looked like one of a thousand little towns that populated this part of the country. Oh maybe it was a little neater—just a little more prosperous looking, but still it was not unusual. As we got closer, we could make out the neat clapboard houses, uniformly white or other light colors nestled among the trees. Some were fairly new—an indication that the town was still growing unlike many small towns. It was probably due to Vulman's success I told myself. All it took was one successful business to keep a town like Ovid in beer and skittles.

"Should we go straight to Vulman?" Dave asked.

"Well, the map leads us there," I replied. "We might as well."

That meant driving through town on the highway, so we got a chance to see all the roadside businesses that populated all small towns.

Connie was reading over the installation plan and Dave was busy driving, trying to be extra safe to make up for his near accident earlier. I on the other hand, had plenty of time to look around.

At first, I saw nothing out of the ordinary. The only thing I found a little odd was the lack of recognizable brands on the roadside businesses. I would have expected to see a Phillips 66 gas station or something similar, but I saw brands of gasoline I had never heard of before. And while most towns the size of Ovid might have a *McDonald's* or a *KFC* or at least a *Pizza Hut*, Ovid had only a local places, like Rusty's Burger Barn.

But that wasn't the strangest thing I saw. If the businesses were a little odd, some of the people were downright unbelievable. They were transparent! No, wait a minute. That isn't quite right. I don't want you to think you could actually see through them. You couldn't do that. It was as if you could sense what was behind them, sort of as if one tiny part of your brain was telling you they weren't exactly there. Does that make sense to you? Probably not, but just keep reading and I'll tell you more about them later.

"Holy Cow!" Dave exclaimed while we stopped at a stoplight. "Did you see that?"

Connie looked up from her computer. "Did I see what?"

"That woman who just crossed the street on a bike," Dave explained. "It's like you could... see right through her."

"Dave!" Connie said in mock exasperation. "So what if she was wearing something revealing? What makes you think I'd care?"

She had misunderstood, I realized when I saw the troubled look on Dave's face. He didn't clarify his remarks, but I could tell from his expression that he had seen one of the transparent people as well.

Now not everyone was transparent, although most of the people I saw were. Still, Connie didn't seem to notice at all while Dave and I did. Maybe we should have said something to her, but she would have just thought we had been smoking something funny. It probably wouldn't

have made a difference. But if I had known then what I know now, I would have demanded that Dave turn the car around and head out of Ovid as fast as possible.

Come to think of it, though, that might not have worked.

Vulman Industries wasn't exactly a huge place, but it was getting bigger. Construction crews were working on an addition to the building, and from all indications, it wasn't the first addition. The company looked like a combined office and manufacturing plant, and from the expansion and the well-kept facility, it was easy to see that business was good. It had to be, I thought. Our systems were good but they weren't cheap.

Normally, this would have been a cushy assignment. The building was new enough that there would be no electrical problems, and with both Dave and Connie there, the install should be a snap. Plus the company looked prosperous enough that no one would get upset when we nickel and dimed them with all the little add-ons that always accompanied an installation like this one.

But I didn't feel like I was on a cushy assignment. I felt there was something very wrong about this—the town and its people seemed just a little bit out of kilter. I really wanted nothing more than to rush through the installation and get out of town, forgetting that I had ever even heard of Ovid. Like a lot of this message, that may seem like an overreaction to you, Jeff, but there was really an odd feel to Ovid—something that made you want to want to get away while you still could.

As we got out of the car, I tried to tell myself it was just my imagination running away with itself. People weren't really transparent. It had to have been a trick of the light, or maybe I was just tired. Maybe Dave was tired, too. After all, Connie hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary. So it had to be my imagination. Peggy had warned me not to stay up late watching those spooky movies on cable.

I had nearly convinced myself once inside Vulman's lobby. A cheery blonde receptionist—buxom but hardly transparent—had paged the

project manager for the network install—a Holly Cache. I had just settled into a comfortable chair in the lobby chastising myself for being so foolish when my little rational fantasy collapsed around me.

“Brenda, will you FedEx this package for me?”

I looked up out of curiosity to see the receptionist accept a package from a young man in a tie. He was quite fit, with dark hair and an even tan. His tie was stylish and his manner professional. He was also transparent. Well, so much for my theory about just being tired, I thought.

Dave noticed it, too. He motioned with his head for me to join him. Then he announced to Connie, “Be right back. I want to check something in the car.”

“I’ll go with you,” I announced, picking up on his ruse.

“What the hell is going on here?” Dave asked me once we were outside the building.

“I don’t know,” I said in a worried voice. “But did you notice how that secretary didn’t see anything strange?”

“Neither did Connie,” Dave pointed out. “She was checking that guy out as if there was nothing wrong with him.”

“I don’t like this,” I muttered.

“So what do we do?”

Every instinct in my body told me it was time to run. I wanted nothing more than to jump in the car, drive back to Tulsa, and catch the first plane to Dallas and pretend as if Ovid never even existed. But something else told me it wouldn’t be as simple to do that as it sounded.

“I think we need to do this install and then worry about what’s going on,” I said slowly.

Dave just nodded in agreement and the two of us reluctantly went back into the office.

When we re-entered the lobby, Connie was standing, talking with a very attractive woman. The woman looked like an Indian princess with her long black hair and perfect bronze skin. She wore her white linen business suit with all the poise of a model, displaying her long, beautiful legs as if she were on a runway. She turned and smiled at us. I would have done anything short of leaving Peggy for one of those smiles.

“Guys, meet Holly Cache,” Connie said, obviously amused at our reaction. “And it’s Mrs. Cache.”

Blushing, Dave and I each shook her feminine hand and introduced ourselves. Her casual but firm handshake reminded me more of a man’s handshake than the lifeless grip so many women had. I found to my relief that despite her model’s looks, Holly was just good people. I could see the wheels turning in Dave’s head though. If only she was single, he was thinking sadly.

“Holly will be our liaison on this project,” Connie explained. “She’s given us a conference room to work out of.”

“I’ll take you there now,” Holly volunteered.

The conference room wasn’t far from the lobby, and it was close to a break room with soda and candy machines along the wall. I looked around to see if any of the transparent people were lounging about, sipping sodas and swapping stories, but the room was empty.

“While Holly gets you guys set up, I’m going to visit the little girl’s room,” Connie said, pointing across the hall.

When she was gone, Holly looked at the two of us. “Okay guys, what’s wrong?”

Dave and I glanced guiltily at each other but neither of us spoke. Just then, a secretary bustled into the room. She was young and as pretty as all the other women we had seen at Vulman with the bright red hair and cute freckles of youth. And she was transparent.

“Holly, here’s that site map you wanted,” she said, favoring us with a smile.

Holly noted our expressions. Then she said, “Andy, Dave, meet Darlene. She’ll be working with us on this project.”

The secretary—Darlene—stuck out a hand. Without thinking, I took it and was relieved to note it was as solid as my own. I was visibly relieved but Darlene failed to notice. Dave had a similar reaction when he shook her hand.

After the usual small talk, Darlene left the room. Holly looked at us with a mischievous smile. “Feel better now, guys?”

“Uh... yes,” I admitted while Dave nodded.

“Look guys, while you’re in Ovid some things might seem a little strange. Just ignore it. You’ll understand before too long; I’m pretty sure of that.”

“But...” Dave began.

Holly shook her head, the luxurious dark hair floating in waves. “No buts. Believe me guys; it’s for your own good. Now, let’s get started on the install.”

Reluctantly, we followed her advice. I suppose we had little choice. Besides, Holly might be an attractive young woman, but she carried herself like someone who was used to being in charge. She had planned out her part of the install with almost military precision. Soon, Dave and I got with the program, ignoring the transparent people as if they were just normal folks while we went about our business. It may seem strange that we were able to stop worrying about the transparent people just like that, but we had a job to do. By the end of the day, we had accomplished far more than we had anticipated.

“We may only need to be here one more day,” Dave told Connie as we drove to the Ovid Inn where the company had rooms reserved for us. “Dave and I can have everything finished by tomorrow at noon. Then we can do a little administrator training with Holly in the afternoon and leave tomorrow evening.”

Connie frowned. “Do you think that’s a good idea? We have a full day blocked out for training.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “but Holly is picking up on it fast. I don’t know what her background is but she knows computers and electronics better than a lot of our employees do.”

“What?” Connie said in mock surprise. “A woman who knows about such things? Why, I do declare!”

“Okay,” I admitted laughing, “So some women are as good at this sort of stuff as men. I never said they weren’t.”

I hadn’t either, but the best techies I had known were almost always men. You and I talked about that over more than one beer, Jeff. We both knew some good female techs, but it has always seemed as if men dominate the field. Take Connie for example. She had great customer skills and a working knowledge of the product, but despite a strong background in computers while in school, Dave and I—and you for that matter—could run circles around her when it came to the complicated stuff.

Dave and I stayed quiet about the transparent people until later that night. The three of us had made good use of our expense accounts at a great steak place called Winston’s. Dave and I had made it a point to ignore the transparency of many of the town’s residents. A satisfying chunk of red meat and a liberal amount of wine were what Dave and I needed to relax us and help us to forget the strange things we had seen in Ovid. For that matter, Connie was no slouch in either the steak or the wine department. How a little thing like her was able to wolf down a steak as big as mine will always be a mystery.

The night was still young, so Dave and I decided to take in the local nightlife. Connie begged off and headed back to her room to call her latest boyfriend and get some sleep. Dave and I decided a place on the highway called Randy Andy’s was just about right to celebrate a good day.

“Besides,” Dave said with a grin, “the place is named for you.”

“The Randy part or the Andy part?”

“Both.”

I think we were both a little disappointed with the place once we walked in. I guess it's too much to expect a strip club in a small Oklahoma town. Randy Andy's was just a bar—no strippers, no hookers, and not even any loud rock music. Well, there was music, but it was Faith Hill on a jukebox, and the volume was set high enough so you could hear it but low enough that you could still talk over it. There was a smell of grease and beer in the place, but oddly no smoke. Not that I minded: I gave up smoking years ago when I married Peggy.

We took a table and ordered a beer from a hot looking babe with an eagle tattoo on her ankle named Sly. That is, the waitress was named Sly. I never did learn what the eagle's name was. She was a friendly type, but Dave and I both got her message: look as much as you want but don't touch.

When our beers came, Dave hunkered down, ready to talk. "What do you think is going on here?" he asked me quiet enough not to be heard beyond our table.

"I don't really know," I sighed. I looked around the room. Some of the patrons were real enough, but others had that strange near transparency that made them seem entirely unreal.

Jeff, it's hard to explain what we were seeing. I'm sure you've conjured up images of ghostly beings by now, but it isn't like that at all. If you glance at one of the transparent people, you might not notice anything wrong. But if you look at one of them—and I mean really concentrate on them—you can sort of make out what's directly behind them. If one of them walks up and starts talking to you, you can see what's behind them, but it seems to fade in and out, as if concentrating on what they're saying makes it harder to concentrate on their transparency. And when you shake hands with them or pat them on the back, they feel as real and as solid as you or I.

"Vulman is involved in government projects," Dave pointed out. "Maybe this is some sort of an experiment—you know, shifting dimensions or something."

“Maybe,” I allowed, “but why is it that some people don’t notice? Connie didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

“I don’t know. Maybe only men can see it.”

“But Holly knows,” I pointed out. “She even warned us not to remark on it. I saw you talking to her alone this afternoon. Did she tell you anything?”

“Nothing,” Dave said with a shake of his head. “It’s almost as if there’s some taboo or something against speaking about it. Everybody just acts like it’s all normal. What about you? Didn’t you wire the president’s office?”

“I did,” I replied. I told him about meeting Eric Vulman. He was friendly enough, I suppose, but he seemed to be different, too. I didn’t mean to imply that he was like the transparent people—just the opposite in fact. He seemed to have a... presence about him. Even though he walked with a noticeable limp, it was as if he was almost regal. And yet we talked amicably. He was interested in our system and asked a lot of questions. And strangely enough, the questions were thoughtful and penetrating, unlike the usual simple-minded questions most CEOs asked me. Although he didn’t volunteer the information, I suspect he was quite an engineer in his own right.

Four bottles of beer on top of the wine at dinner accomplished nothing other than more speculation, and each beer seemed to cause us to consider even more outlandish answers. The funny thing is that we never hit on the real answer, and it was probably more outlandish than anything we imagined. I wish I could tell you what the answer was, Jeff, but we were right about one thing: there are some taboos in Ovid, and talking about some of them is forbidden. I can’t even type some of the answers out. Whenever I try, my fingers come down on the shift keys and nothing happens.

The next morning wasn’t a terribly pleasant one for me. The three of us had split two bottles of wine with dinner. The four beers on top of that had created a hellish swimming pool in my stomach. I was popping Roloids as if they were candy. At least a big fluffy cinnamon

roll at a place called Nellie's Grill soaked up some of the stuff, but even that didn't help much. And I read someplace that coffee doesn't really help your hangover. If that's the case, Dave and I wasted a lot of time drinking an entire pot.

"I'm going to have to keep a better eye on you boys," Connie laughed when she saw our distress. The thing a person with a hangover hates most is another person without a hangover. I mumbled something unintelligible to her. Dave just groaned.

Somehow, we got through the morning. In spite of our infirmities, the rest of the install went well. As we had thought the day before, we were finished before lunch. The ever-efficient Holly had her staff gathered in the conference room right after lunch. Connie handled most of that training session, allowing Dave and I to relax as we nursed our hangovers at the back of the room. We were finished by three thirty.

While Connie was in no particular hurry, using the extra time to schmooze Holly and her staff, Dave and I were champing at the bit to get the hell out of town. Our bags were already in the car and Dave thought he could make it back to Tulsa in time to catch a late flight back to Dallas. I had even called Peggy from a Vulman phone (cell phones don't work here) and told her jokingly to kick her lover out of bed because I'd be home by midnight.

At last, Connie said her last goodbyes and we were ready to hit the trail. But it wasn't to be.

As we bustled through the lobby, we found our path blocked by an imposing man. He was middle aged with graying hair and skin that was tanned and weathered by a lot of time outdoors. He looked almost uncomfortable in a suit, and I couldn't help but think that this was a man you wanted by your side when the going got rough. The only thing that kept him from being an aging Indiana Jones was the noticeable limp when he walked. I, of course had already met him.

There was a bright smile on his face as he stuck out a large, strong hand. "You must be the rest of the team from Aldeberan," he said with

a nod to Dave and an appreciative glance at Connie. “I’m Eric Vulman.” When they had received his firm handshake and introduced themselves, and I had shaken his hand once again, he continued, “Holly has told me you all did a great job.”

We thanked him with suitable embarrassment.

“We’re all a little new at this networking stuff,” he told us. “Is there someone we should get in touch with if none of you are available?”

I imagine at least one of us will be available all the time,” Connie told him. She was in typical sales mode. Actually, there were times when we were all out of touch—like now. Unless someone knew to call us at Vulman, they wouldn’t reach us since none of our cell phones seemed to be working. We had just thought at the time that there were no cells in Ovid. Strangely, none of us had found it odd that we had been completely out of contact with the office for a couple of days. Normally, that would have driven us nuts.

“Well, perhaps,” Eric Vulman allowed. “And perhaps not.”

He said it so matter-of-factly that none of us found it a cryptic remark at the time. Later, we would understand why he had asked the question—or at least Dave and I would.

Connie gave him a whole list of people to call—including you, Jeff. I doubt if he’s called you though. You were pretty far down the list. Connie never cared much for you for some reason. Sorry, old pal, but that’s the way it was.

It was late afternoon by the time we actually pulled away from Vulman. I had driving duties, and I have to say I was so anxious to get away from Ovid that I hadn’t been paying any attention to the speed limit. I don’t really think in retrospect that it would have mattered if I had been paying attention to it though. When the Judge wants you, he wants you.

Oh, I guess I haven’t told you about the Judge yet, have I, Jeff? Well, I’ll get to him in a little while. Just take my word for it—the Judge is someone you don’t want to meet.

Anyhow, my stomach dropped through the bottom of the car when I heard a police siren start up behind me. I could have sworn there hadn't been a police car in sight. Besides, I was only doing forty and the speed limit along the four-lane stretch of road leading out of Ovid had to be at least thirty-five.

"Shit!" Connie muttered. "Now we'll be late for the evening flight."

I looked at Dave and he looked back at me. We didn't have to say it, but both of us suspected there was far more at stake than missing the late flight.

I don't know how to explain it to you, Jeff, but there's a feel to this place. It's a little like the feeling you get in a strange place when you think something is going to jump out at you from the shadows. You know it isn't really going to happen, but the feeling just won't go away. The difference with Ovid is that there really is something hiding in the shadows, and just when you think it's all just your imagination, that 'something' jumps out at you.

Our 'something' was about six feet tall, very slender and trim, and wore mirrored sunglasses even though the afternoon sun was abating. Remember the bad guys in *The Matrix*? Remember the unsmiling expression and the dark glasses the baddies in the dark suits wore? Well, take away the dark suit and put one of them in a police uniform and you'd have what was walking calmly toward our car.

"License and registration," the officer demanded before I could say a word. With a sigh, I handed him everything he had requested.

"I was only doing thirty-five, officer," I pleaded weakly, knowing I was doing forty.

"But the speed limit is twenty-five," he told me, not bothering to look up from my documents.

"Twenty-five!" Connie echoed from the seat next to me. "On this stretch of road? That's ridiculous!"

Connie just couldn't seem to see and feel what Dave and I did. To her, this was just another small town with a speed trap. I don't know what it

is about some women, but they'll cry and try to get out of a ticket when they're at the wheel, but they'll do everything in their power to piss off the cop when they're not driving. Go figure.

"I'll have to ask you to follow me to the station," the officer said as he handed my driver's license and the rental agreement back to me.

"Can we take care of this quickly?" I asked as politely as I could.

"We're trying to make it to Tulsa to catch a late-night flight."

"Just follow me," he repeated.

"Well, I guess we'll have to stay at a hotel by the airport," Dave said with a sigh. Then he added, "If we're lucky."

We weren't going to be lucky, I thought when we got to the police station. Jeff, that strange officer—Mercer is his name—booked us! There was this nice young black woman in a police uniform, and she took down all of our vital information and put our personal belongings in envelopes. The next thing you know, she and Officer Mercer are leading us off to cells—one for Connie and another for Dave and me.

"This is ridiculous!" Connie yelled as she was unceremoniously nudged into her cell down the hall from ours. It's a good thing she didn't have a tin cup or she'd probably have been banging it against the cell door.

And it really was ridiculous if you think about it, Jeff. Nobody throws you in jail for a lousy speeding violation unless you were doing ninety in a thirty zone or drunk or something like that. The worst that would normally happen is you'd have to stay over and appear in court the next morning. Most of the time, you could just mail the money for the fine in. But jail?

"Can we see a lawyer?" I asked as Dave and I were put in our cell.

"In the morning," Officer Mercer told us.

And that was it. I won't bore you with how we spent the night in jail. Let's just say it was only the second time I had ever been in jail and I didn't like it. Remember the first time, Jeff? No, I don't suppose you do. We were in college and ended up sneaking into one of those

casinos over on the reservation near Topeka. Then they figured out we had phony IDs and threw us out. We drove back through a little town called Hiawatha and got arrested for drunk driving. We spent the night in jail there. I can remember how my parents wouldn't even bail me out and we had to wait until the next day for your dad to get us out. Yeah, those were the good old days. It's a shame you probably don't remember any of them.

I suppose I should point out in all fairness that Ovid's jail wasn't like that little dumpy one up in Hiawatha. No, it was actually comfortable. The black officer—Hazleton was her name, Wanda Hazleton—brought us a pretty decent dinner. And the beds were actually comfortable, even though it was a little disconcerting to have a toilet along one wall.

We were close enough to Connie's cell that we could talk to her even if we couldn't see her. She spent most of the evening ranting and raving about what she was going to do when she got back to Dallas and saw her own lawyer. Me? I just wanted to get our court appearance over with. I think Dave felt the same way.

Although we didn't talk about it—except to make a few off-hand comments—both Dave and I realized this wasn't just a simple speeding case. If it had been, we would have been brought before a local magistrate—even if they had to pull him off the golf course—fined, and sent on our way. No, they wanted us and not just for our fine money. It was a sobering realization, I thought, as I drifted off for a few hours of troubled sleep.

After a decent breakfast, all three of us were led from our cells into a courtroom. No one would give us a good explanation as to why Dave and Connie had been put in jail. After all, I was the guy who had been driving. They were just passengers. Well, they'd regret it in the end. Connie was serious about getting her lawyer on the situation as soon as we got back to Dallas. She was already muttering about false arrest and imprisonment and how the town of Ovid had better have a lot of money because she was going to sue them for plenty. Of course, that all depended upon our ability to get back to Dallas.

The courtroom was well appointed with oak benches and wainscoting.

And it was immaculately clean, the woods brought to a high polish in the morning light and floors so clean you could eat off them. I couldn't help but think the room was almost like a courtroom set you'd see in the movies—almost too good to be true.

There were only two other people in the room when Officer Mercer led us in. One was a very attractive blonde woman sitting in the gallery. She was well dressed, wearing a tan suit and a skirt short enough that it showed off a fine pair of legs. I thought that maybe she also had an appearance in court that day. I could think of no other reason for her to be there.

The other person in the room was a very attractive brunette. She too, was wearing a suit, only hers was a deep burgundy shade offset by a white blouse. She was sitting at one of the tables at the front of the room, and I realized suddenly that she was our court-appointed attorney.

"Susan Jager," she said, rising to offer us her hand. Each of us in turn shook it and introduced ourselves. "I'll be your attorney today, as you've probably guessed."

"I'd prefer my own attorney," Connie interjected. "No offense."

"None taken," Susan replied with an unwavering smile. "However, I should warn you—all of you—this isn't the sort of proceeding you think it is."

That got my interest. "I assumed I was here on a speeding charge."

"On the surface, that is why you're here," Susan agreed, "but you may have noticed that things are a little different here in Ovid."

It was nice to know I wasn't just imagining things, but deep down, I would have been as happy as a pig in shit if she had told me that Ovid was just one big speed trap and I was about to get a thousand dollar fine. "Different... how?" I managed to ask.

"For the moment, let's just say there's a lot more to Ovid than meets the eye," Susan replied. "You'll see what I mean."

"All rise," Officer Mercer suddenly intoned. "Ovid Municipal Court is

now in session, the Honorable Judge presiding.”

Yes, I thought, turning to face the front of the room, Susan was undoubtedly right. There was more to Ovid than met the eye.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but the Judge wasn’t it. I think maybe I was expecting someone who looked more like Count Dracula than the middle-aged man in his neatly pressed black robe who strode regally to the bench. He seemed very fit, his face lean and his beard neatly trimmed. His hair and beard showed only a little gray, and I estimated him to be no more than forty-five. His glasses were gold rimmed but did little to hide piercing eyes.

“Be seated,” he commanded, his voice betraying just a little of the famous Oklahoma twang.

We took our seats and Susan whispered to me, “Just stay calm and everything will be all right.”

“Officer Mercer, what do we have on the docket today?” the Judge asked.

“The City of Ovid versus Andrew Skinner, charged with speeding.”

“And the other two?”

“Accomplices.”

It was too much for Connie. She let out a groan and rose to her feet.

“Your Honor, I may not be an attorney but I know there’s no such thing as being an accomplice to speeding and...”

Her lips continued to move but nothing came out. I watched in horrid fascination as her eyes went wide and she grabbed her throat. At first, I thought she was having some sort of seizure, brought on by her anger. Then I noticed no one in the courtroom was moving to help her. In fact, the Judge had a very satisfied look on his face.

“We will have no more outbursts in this courtroom,” the Judge demanded sternly. “Is that clear?”

Connie could only fearfully nod her head.

“Then sit down and be quiet.”

I wasn't sure if Connie sat voluntarily or was forced to sit, but one way or the other, she plopped down in her seat.

“How do your clients plead, Ms. Jager?”

Susan looked at me. I mouthed “guilty.” To be honest, Jeff, I was scared shitless of the Judge. As wacko as it may sound to you, there were supernatural forces at work in that courtroom, and you could actually feel them. Of course, if I'd known what was coming, I would have done everything in my power to avoid a guilty verdict—not that there was anything I could have done. The deck was already stacked against us.

“Guilty, Your Honor,” Susan said formally, ignoring Connie's wordless protests.

“The defendants will rise,” the Judge intoned. Dave and I rose slowly to our feet, but Connie tried to fight it and was jerked rudely to her feet by some unseen force.

“I find the three of you guilty as charged.”

Up to that point, the formal language of the court had ruled. Now though, the Judge closed his eyes and began to chant in some language I had never heard before. I suppose it might have been Latin, but it wasn't like any Latin I had ever heard before. Rather than the stilted language I thought of as Latin, it was almost melodious with a cadence not unlike modern Italian. Remember when we took that Italian class in college? No, I suppose you don't.

As I stood there, I began to feel odd. It was as if my there were a thousand living things crawling about inside my body. It's a feeling I hope you never experience. At least there was no pain, but there's every other sort of sensation all wrapped into one.

I looked over at Dave and Connie. Something was happening to them as well. It was hard to tell just what was happening, but it seemed as if both of them were... changing.

Jeff, this next part is the part where you may decide to erase this

whole message and forget all about this, chalking it up to somebody who's gone completely loony tune. Please don't do it, though, I beg you! I swear all of this really happened. Even if you don't believe it, please read on.

The most obvious change was happening to Connie. She was shrinking. Never all that tall to begin with, she was only four feet, then three feet tall. I didn't know where she was going to stop. Then I looked at Dave. He was shrinking, too, but not as much. And his hair—it had turned a vibrant red and seemed to be getting longer as I watched.

Then I looked down at myself. The dress shirt I had been wearing with a tie the day before was changing color. No longer white, it was now bright yellow and becoming some sort of knit fabric clinging tightly to my chest. As for my chest, it was becoming smaller as well—less defined somehow. But then, two bumps appeared beneath the fabric. They were small, but growing larger. “Oh my God!” I screamed, surprised at how thin my voice suddenly sounded.

Then I did what any rational man would do under the circumstances—I passed out.

Have you ever noticed how women faint but men pass out? It's okay for a guy to pass out, particularly from, say, too much beer or what have you. But fainting is a sign of weakness, isn't it? So I didn't faint. I kept telling myself that as I climbed back out of my mental fog. I really didn't faint.

“Are you okay, honey?” a soft, concerned feminine voice was asking me.

I tried to grunt a “yes” but it didn't come out very clearly. It was more like a sigh, partially from the pleasant feeling I had of something cold and wet placed against my forehead. Slowly, I managed to look out of blurry eyes at Susan who was holding a wet cloth to my head.

I knew where I was. I was lying on one of the benches in the courtroom. I must have passed out from the stress or something, I thought. That must have been why I thought I saw Dave and Connie

changing. Obviously no one could be changed by a small town judge mumbling Latin over them. But just then, I put a small, slender hand to my forehead and learned just how drastically a person could be changed.

“Holy shit!” I screamed in a high-pitched voice as I sat up with a start. It hadn’t been a hallucination after all. I looked down, first at my hands. Then I looked at the rest of myself. Myself? Well, I looked down at who I had become. I was wearing a yellow tank top and very, very short denim shorts. And my body was obviously young—and just as obviously female.

That’s right, Jeff—I’m a girl now.

I wish you could remember me as I was before and appreciate the irony of all of this. Of the two of us, I was always the guy sniffing around for a little pussy—before Peggy of course. Now I had one of my very own, and I wasn’t very happy about it.

“Who... what...?” I managed, then turned around to gaze at the bench. The Judge was nowhere to be seen.

“He’s gone,” Susan said gently. “You and I are the only ones still here.”

“He... I...” Oh I was making brilliant conversation that day, wasn’t I?

“That’s right, honey, he changed you into a girl,” Susan told me.

“Since girls as young as you don’t always carry ID’s around, it’s my job to fill you in and send you home.”

“I... I don’t want to be a girl.” And I didn’t want to be sent home, either. Something told me that didn’t mean the place I shared with Peggy in Dallas.

Susan gave me a sympathetic look. “I know you don’t, but you are one and you’ll be one for the rest of your life.”

The rest of my life? But what about my other life? I wanted to ask. What about my real life? What about Peggy? We had planned to have a family. I couldn’t have a family with her looking like this. Well, I suppose I could, but I shuddered at the thought of bearing children.

Susan seemed to understand. "Just relax for a minute. I know what you're thinking. If you try to accept this, it will be easier for you."

"Accept it?" I asked, trying to make it a fearsome roar. But it came out just a plaintive little cry. "How can I accept it? I'm not a girl. I can't be a girl!"

Okay, I was a little hysterical, but can you blame me? Just think about what it would be like, Jeff, to wake up and find you have these little stick-like hairless arms with slender fingers tipped with pink polish. Think what it's like to have long blonde (that's right—I'm a blonde) hair tickling the tops of your shoulders. Think about what it's like—if you can—to have little perky breasts sitting on your chest and this curious feeling of emptiness between your legs. I felt small and weak. Hell, I was small and weak. And to top it off, I was starting to cry.

"Don't cry, honey," Susan said in a tone that was surprisingly comforting. I couldn't help it. I buried my face in her breasts and cried like a baby.

Eventually, the crying stopped and Susan helped me out to her car. It was a little Honda Civic. Apparently being a lawyer in a small town didn't pay terribly well. I plopped down into the front seat and waited for Susan to get seated behind the wheel.

"Where are we going?" I asked, disgusted with the sweet little voice I now had.

"I'm taking you home," Susan said. "You're Carrie Anne Summers now and you stayed home from school today because you weren't feeling well."

School! Oh shit.

"You're thirteen and in the seventh grade," she continued. "You're an only child as well."

"I'm not going through with this," I said petulantly, trying to find some way of folding my arms over my chest without pressing on my little breasts. They weren't very large but I could feel them anyway.

"You have to," Susan replied. "You really don't have a choice."

Everyone in town will remember you as Carrie Summers. If you go around trying to convince people that you're a man who's been changed into a girl, they won't believe you."

"Are you trying to tell me that we're the only ones who know who I really am?" I asked.

"Not exactly," she admitted. "There are others like you—and me for that matter—who will realize you've been changed just as we were. But most of us learn to accept what's happened to us. We even come to be glad it happened."

I shuddered as she spoke. I felt as if I had been dropped into the middle of a bizarre remake of *The Stepford Wives*. Susan had just admitted that she, too, had been changed and yet she enjoyed the change. I suppose she must have been a woman before. Maybe she was an ugly old crone made young and attractive by the Judge. Whatever her reasons, I knew that there was no way I would ever accept what had been done to me. My career, my marriage, my very life had been taken from me and I would never be happy in Ovid.

"I know you don't believe me now," she said as if reading my mind. "But you'll see. The important thing is to try to fit in."

"Try to act like a thirteen-year-old girl?" I asked sarcastically. "What am I supposed to do—put pictures of Leonardo on my wall and listen to the Backstreet Boys?"

"It might help," she replied. I don't think the sarcasm was lost on her though, and I wasn't pleased by her faint smile of amusement.

"I'll get away," I argued. "I'll get out of Ovid. I'll get someone to believe me."

Susan shook her head. "There isn't any way out of Ovid—at least not until you accept what's happened to you. You'll find you can't get beyond the hills surrounding the town. If you try, you'll just find yourself back in Ovid."

"Just what's going on here?" I asked her as she came to a stop in front of a neat two-story house in a relatively new area.

“There’s no easy answer to that,” she told me as she put the car in park and turned to face me. “No one really knows exactly why all this is happening—except the Judge and his... people.”

“And they’re not telling,” I surmised. “So just who or what is this Judge?”

“Sorry,” she replied. “That’s something you’ll have to figure out for yourself. Now go on. Your mother will be home soon.”

“Wait a minute,” I called before she could pull away. “If I’m supposed to be sick, what’s wrong with me?”

Susan gave me a mischievous little smile. “Well, your mother thinks you might be getting your first period.”

I felt all the blood drain out of my face.

“Don’t worry,” she laughed. “According to the Judge, it’s a false alarm. Remember, Carrie, act the part or the Judge will be angry with you.”

“Yeah? And what more can he do to me?”

“Well,” she said slowly, “I had one client who found himself in diapers since he refused to act the part he had been given. I don’t think you’d want that, would you?”

“No.”

“Okay.” She shifted the car into gear. “Good luck, Carrie!”

Some attorney, I thought as she drove away. Sure, she could tell me what to do. She’d always been a girl. So what if she had a new life? She was attractive, a professional, and an adult. I was none of those things. Well, maybe I was attractive. I hadn’t had a chance to see myself in a mirror. To be honest, I really didn’t want to. If I was attractive, I’d just be hit on by pimple-faced little boys. And if I wasn’t attractive... well, I really didn’t want that either. All I really wanted was to get my old life back.

There was a house key in my shorts. Now don’t ask how I knew that, Jeff. If you were wearing little teenybopper shorts like I was, you’d know there was a key in the pocket, too—that’s how tight they were. So

I opened the door and got my first look at my new house.

Everything looked pretty normal—and I mean *Leave it to Beaver* normal. The house was neat and middle-class nice. There was even a cat snoozing on the sofa—a cute little white cat. Yeah, right—it was cute. I find myself saying words like that even when I try not to. The cat just looked up at me and continued its snooze. I suppose it knew me—or thought it did.

I had the run of the house and used it to good advantage. Of course finding my room was not a problem. All I had to do was look for the room with the most frills and a color scheme made up of cheery feminine colors. In this case, the colors were peach and white. I suppose it could have been worse—it could have been pink. Needless to say, there were dolls on the bed and cosmetics on a small dressing table. At thirteen, my existence would be a balancing act between the child I had supposedly been and the young adult I was soon to become.

It was about then that I noticed a full-length mirror on the closet door. Well, I had to look at myself sometime, I thought. Hesitantly, I moved in front of the mirror. I can tell you, Jeff, I didn't like what I saw. In short, I was hopelessly cute. I don't mean gorgeous or anything like that. I was just... cute. I had long blonde hair—the dark sort of blonde—that had just enough curl to it that it framed my face and seemed to bounce at my shoulders.

And as for a face, mine was cute enough to be in those Saturday morning commercials on TV pushing breakfast cereals or something. I was pleased at first as I thought it was devoid of any makeup. No such luck, upon closer examination. I was wearing very light makeup which I guessed was appropriate to my age, but not so much that I looked like jail bait. Damn, Jeff, I even had pierced ears and little gold earrings.

My body was small and willowy. I was sure I didn't even top five feet. And of course, I had the appropriate female shape. It wasn't fully developed, but I could tell that in a very few years, this body was going to be a show stopper. The breasts were small and just

developing. The hips were narrow, but the waist was already femininely tiny. And remember that pink polish on my fingernails, Jeff? Well, it was on my toes, too, for I could see it through the white straps on my sandals. My legs were lithe and tanned—completely hairless of course. I wondered if I was one of those fortunate girls who had little body hair or if I would have to shave my legs regularly. Of course, I was young enough that I might develop more hair later. What a happy thought.

I knew what was—or was not—inside those little denim shorts, but I decided to wait until another time to examine my new equipment. Somehow, the idea of fondling the private parts of a thirteen-year-old girl seemed a little perverted—even though I was the thirteen-year-old girl. Well, Susan had said something about my periods not starting just yet. I suppose in girls that means the sex drive wasn't fully developed. It was just as well. As a boy, I was already a horny little bastard at thirteen.

That was an uncomfortable thought, I realized. Looking at myself in the mirror, I could appreciate the fact that I was attractive, but I didn't think of myself as a sexual object. I was just... me. Did that mean I'd view women as just like me and men as sexually interesting? I didn't want that to happen, believe me. I had no interest in boys or men or whatever. The only penis I ever wanted to see again was my old one back where it belonged.

I examined my thoughts a little more though. What about Susan? When I had been ushered into the courtroom, I had thought of her as a very attractive woman. When I thought about her now, I realized she was still attractive, but in a more academic sort of way. Strangely, I thought of her as being an older woman, yet I was sure that before my transformation we were both about the same age.

I looked again at my image in the mirror. Somehow, it didn't look quite as alien as it had before. That seemed to be me staring out of those blue eyes. That's when I think I realized the magic of this town wasn't quite done with me yet.

You and I used to sit around back in college and discuss how the

human mind was like the computers we studied. It is subject to programming which is far more sophisticated and subtle than the raw code we plug into our computers, but it is strangely analogous. I began to realize that I was being constantly bombarded with inputs that declared me to be the girl I had become. My image in the mirror, the hormones rushing through my body, and even the genetic makeup of my brain were all working in concert to tell me that I was a thirteen-year-old girl.

Susan gave me to understand most transformed people went along with their new roles. I could understand now why that was. Add to that the interaction with my 'parents,' my classmates, my teachers and so on, it wouldn't take long for me to fall into the trap the Judge had set for me. I had to keep that from happening, but how?

The answer came to me just as I heard a car pulling into the driveway. I would have to escape from Ovid. I read someplace that one of the reasons the military encourages its members to try to escape when captured is that the hope of escape and rescue gives them the will to resist their captors. I knew that at least for now, I was stuck as a young girl, but if I could get away and convince the authorities that I wasn't just some little teenager wigged out on drugs, I might force an investigation. As the door downstairs opened, my mind was filled with the fantasy of FBI agents overrunning the town and forcing the Judge to change me back into my real self.

"Carrie, are you all right?" It was a woman's voice, gentle and concerned.

"Up here..." I called back, reluctantly adding, "...Mother." Gee, I would have felt stupid if it wasn't my mother, but it was a pretty safe bet.

In moments, a thirty-something woman was at the door of my room. Actually, she looked much like a more mature version of my own body. She was wearing a skirt and heels, as if she had just come from work. I was relieved to see she was as real as me. A transparent mother might have been a little too much to deal with. "How are you feeling, honey?"

“Okay,” I replied with a shrug.

“No... bleeding or anything?”

Bleeding. Oh shit! She was talking about periods. I managed to shake my head, hoping she didn’t see the disgust I was feeling.

“Well, then maybe it was just a false alarm,” she surmised. “Or you could have had a little food poisoning or something. Maybe it was just the flu.”

“I think so,” I replied, playing along. Was this woman a transformed person as well? I had a strange feeling the Judge had changed quite a few people in Ovid. If so, did she remember who she was before? Was she an ally? She just appeared to be what she acted like—my mother. Well, I’d just have to play my part—for the moment.

“Well, I guess you won’t need these,” she said, pulling a box of tampons out of a small sack she had been carrying. “I’ll put them in your bathroom though. You know the doctor said you might begin your flow at any time.”

Wonderful.

I won’t bore you with my first evening as a girl. It consisted mostly of hiding out in my room anyway. Oh, I had dinner with my ‘parents.’ Mother turned out to be a hospital administrator and my father managed a farm equipment dealership. He, unfortunately, was one of the transparent people, but he seemed normal enough. He even gave me a hug, and I have to admit he felt as solid as any normal person.

The biggest problem for the evening seemed to be the constant stream of phone calls I got. They were all from girls I apparently went to school with. They told me what I had missed in classes and gave me my homework assignments which I realized I would have to do. Then, they wanted to chat away by the hour about this boy and that boy. Isn’t Jack a hunk? Do you think Paul likes Amy? Josh was looking at you the other day in the cafeteria—do you think he likes you? I played along as best I could, but the constant subject of boys, boys, and more boys bored me quickly. I usually got out of the call by

pleading that I was still tired from my supposed illness.

I had agreed to walk to the bus with one of the girls. Her name was Wendy, and although I wasn't exactly excited about the idea of chumming around with a girl, I would need someone to show me around—even if she didn't realize she was doing that. The only concession I had to make is that she wanted us both to wear skirts. Apparently, girls have their own dress code: if you're going to hang with me you have to dress like me. What a crock of shit!

I got ready for bed as quickly as I could, grimacing at the unwanted experiences of evening ablutions as a girl. I don't even want to talk about all the details, but I don't think you can imagine my sense of loss when I looked between my legs for the first time. It's not as if sitting to pee is such a problem. All guys do it sometimes. The problem is knowing you have no choice but to sit down to pee.

Fortunately, the girl I had become seemed to favor pajamas over nighties. Maybe that's common for thirteen-year-old girls. It's probably why Victoria's Secret doesn't have a children's department. At least I didn't have to brood over being a girl once in bed. Having your sex changed is tiring work, and I was asleep in no time.

'Mother' had to bark at me a couple of times the next morning. The truth was I didn't want to get up and go to school. I thought about feigning illness again, but decided against it. As unpalatable as it was, I was going to have to face the world sometime. It might as well be right then.

At least I had discovered the night before something that made my new life a little easier. I found that if I just relaxed and let my mind go blank, my body would do whatever was natural. That meant I had wiped myself like a pro and even braided my hair before bed. So when I finally managed to pull myself out of bed, I just relaxed and let everything happen.

Everything included a shower. It was hard to blank out my mind while I was soaping up all my new parts. I'm sure my nipples were fairly small since my breasts hadn't fully developed, but they felt huge when I was

washing them—not to mention very sensitive. Washing between my legs wasn't quite as difficult as I had imagined. Because so much of my new hardware was internal, it wasn't too harrowing. I actually got used to it pretty quickly.

I did my hair as if I had been doing it all my life, but I balked a little when it came time for makeup. I know—if I'd just blanked my mind, it wouldn't have been a problem, but lipstick tastes funny. But I managed eventually. Fortunately, I didn't seem to require a lot of makeup. But the combination of makeup, hairspray and cologne made me smell like a flowerbed.

As for the clothing, all I can say is that I was wearing more than the day before. My top was pink and sleeveless, but it didn't seem to expose as much skin as the one I had awakened wearing the day before. The skirt Wendy had insisted I wear was about the size of a table napkin. It was khaki and well made, but I swear I could feel a draft on my butt. A pair of brown leather sandals with just a little tiny hint of a heel was enough to complete the outfit I reasoned, but by keeping my mind blank, I soon found myself wearing two bracelets—one on my ankle—a necklace, and earrings. I felt like a fucking Christmas tree.

A hurried breakfast didn't seem out of character. 'Dad' had already left by the time I got to the table and 'Mom' was just finishing up. I didn't even have to decide what to eat. Apparently Carrie was a cereal and juice sort of girl. I gulped it down quickly, barely tasting it, and bolted the table just as the doorbell rang.

Wendy was one of the transparent people, but I tried not to notice. She was one of those perky little redheads who would eventually end up on the cheerleading squad. But she was glad to see me and didn't notice anything odd about me. We caught the school bus together, and once on board I found myself in a gaggle of girls all laughing and giggling. I hoped they didn't notice how I was hanging back. Fortunately, they were too busy discussing their social lives to notice that I hadn't spoken.

Ovid Middle School ('Home of the Fighting Centaurs') was fairly new

and modern, but I looked at it with all the apprehension of a villager looking at Frankenstein's Castle. Middle school wasn't much fun until I met you, Jeff. So I had a few flashbacks regarding my first time there back when I was a boy. At last, Wendy noticed something was wrong.

"Are you okay, Carrie?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. I guess it's just that I'm a little off balance from yesterday." Boy, was that an understatement!

"So was it your period?" one of the other girls—I think her name was April—asked.

"Uh... no."

"Bummer," a cute brunette named Donna commented. "I started mine three months ago." The way she said it, she seemed actually proud of the fact.

"Yeah, me too," April chimed in. "You started, too, didn't you Wendy?"

"Last month."

My God, Jeff, did you know girls stood around proudly talking about when their periods began? Can you imagine a bunch of guys standing around talking about the first time they were able to jack off?

So began my first day of school as a girl. I won't belabor you with all the details from my first morning as a girl. Let's just say it was everything I was afraid it would be. Once Wendy unwittingly led me to my first class, I tried to keep to myself. But you know what the problem with that is? When you're a girl, it's sort of like being prey and boys are the predators. If you're not part of the herd, they move in on you. By lunch, I had fended off the unwelcome attention of half the boys in my own seventh grade and a few from the eighth. I rushed to become part of a flock of girls just to avoid the attention.

Unfortunately, being part of a group of girls wasn't exactly delightful. I had gotten away with saying very little in the morning on the way to school, but now I was prodded into joining into the conversation. My 'friend' Wendy is a genuine airhead. All she can talk about is boys. As for the other girls, I found myself part of a pack of 'popular' girls

numbering about half a dozen. Only one of those girls was not transparent, and I found in my attempts to learn more about what was going on in Ovid that she thought she had always been the girl she now was. Who knows? Maybe she was right. As I write this, I still haven't learned all the rules in Ovid yet.

One good thing happened that day, and it happened right after lunch. I found Dave. Of course, Dave wasn't the Dave I remembered...

"Andy!"

The hair on the back of my neck rose as I heard my real name called. It was an unfamiliar woman's voice that had called me. I was just on my way to the girl's room before afternoon classes when I heard it. I turned and saw a very attractive redheaded woman of perhaps twenty-five peering out at me from an office. I recognized her as Judy Carlson, the principal's secretary. One of the other girls had made a comment about her when she was walking down the hall earlier. Come to think of it, it had been Wendy who had said, "You know half the boys in the school have fantasies about Mrs. Carlson." Close up, I could see why—she was an absolutely stunning redhead.

"Yes... Mrs. Carlson?" I said carefully.

"Andy, it's me—Dave!" she said.

In spite of myself, I laughed. "Dave?"

She frowned. "You've got nothing to laugh about, little girl. Come in my office."

Fortunately, everyone else had gone to lunch, so we had the office to ourselves. As Dave—or maybe I should now say Judy—sat down, I noticed she was wearing two and a half inch heels. At least I had been spared that indignity for the time being. Then she crossed her legs in a most feminine fashion. I noticed to my dismay that I had already done the same without thinking.

"I was worried about you," Judy began. "When you passed out, I was afraid something had gone wrong."

I gestured at my body. "What more could go wrong than this?" I asked.

“Well, you could be like Connie.”

My heart stopped. “What’s wrong with Connie?”

“She’s a little boy now,” Judy explained. “Right after you passed out, her transformation was finished. But she doesn’t remember a thing. She started acting like a little three- or four-year-old boy calling for her mother. I guess it’s his mother now though, isn’t it? Anyhow, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t remember ever being Connie. That blonde who was watching us took him and gave him to a woman who acted like she was his mother.”

What was with that Judge? I wondered. Did he change everyone’s sex? Based on what he had done to us, that appeared to be the case. “So Connie forgot who she used to be?”

Judy nodded. “It would seem so. Apparently that’s pretty common from what I’ve heard.”

I would have to agree based upon what I had seen. “What else have you heard? And who told you?”

“There’s a teacher in seventh grade math who remembers who she used to be.”

“Was she a man, too?”

“No,” Judy replied. “She was always a woman—but she was an elderly one before. That’s why she’s here.”

“I don’t understand...”

“Look... what is your name now? I can’t very well go around calling you Andy anymore,” Judy remarked.

I felt my face redden as I said, “Carrie. Carrie Anne Summers.”

“Well look, Carrie, people for the most part don’t come here by accident,” she explained. “Apparently the Judge and that Officer Mercer have a lot of help around here—probably including our attorney and that blonde in the gallery. Denise—that’s the teacher I was telling you about—knows who the Judge and Officer Mercer are, but apparently she can’t talk about it. There are all sorts of rules like that

here. Just like the way I'm talking with you—if one other person comes in the office, we can't talk about any of this."

"I know how to keep my mouth shut," I said a little indignantly.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I don't mean we wouldn't want to talk about it. I mean we physically couldn't talk about it. Remember what happened to Connie in the courtroom when she tried to talk?"

I nodded.

"Anyhow, the way things seem to work around here is that you have to be about ready to die before the Judge takes an interest in you."

"Die?" I asked. "You mean like that old lady you mentioned. She was going to die of a heart attack or something?"

"A stroke according to her."

I leaned forward, then back again as my small breasts shifted disconcertingly. "But all of us were young. We weren't about to die..." Then I added, "Unless..."

Judy closed her eyes and nodded slowly. "We already had died—or would have if that truck hadn't been magically kept out of our way."

I remembered the incident. Come to think of it, at the time it happened, I had dubbed it a miracle. God, I hated being right this time.

"So you're saying even if we got out of here, everybody will think we've died?" I asked.

"No," she responded with a little quake in her voice. "People won't think we ever existed."

I sat in stunned silence staring at her.

"I called the office this morning," she went on. "I was surprised it was so simple. I thought they'd have the phones blocked or something. So I asked for Jeff Bradshaw, but he was out of the office. Then I checked in with Sally over in accounting. I knew she'd never believe I was Dave Malloy, so I pretended to be Connie, and..."

I leaned forward again, ignoring my little breasts. “And...?” I prompted.

She sighed, “And she had never heard of Connie—or of any of us for that matter. It was like we never existed. Then I called my mother...”

Before she could continue, Judy let out a sob. “I’m sorry. I just seem so... so... emotional now. So I talked to Mom and... and... she had never had a son named Dave. She told me I must have the wrong number. God, Carrie, we don’t exist except... except like this!”

I had been so busy just adjusting to my new body that I hadn’t even thought about calling Peggy. Even if I had, how would I have been able to explain to her that I was her husband transformed into a thirteen-year-old girl? Now there was no hope of ever talking to her. She wouldn’t even remember me as her husband. I almost felt like crying, too, but I managed to hold it back.

“What are we going to do?” she asked me.

“Why ask me?” I returned. “At least you’re an adult. I’m just a kid.”

To my surprise, she laughed through her tears. “And you don’t know how lucky you are. Let me tell you what happened to me after you passed out. Some guy came into the courtroom and headed right for me. He was about thirty-five or so, nicely dressed. He asked me if I’d gotten my new driver’s license—with my married name on it!”

I looked down in horror, noticing for the first time the diamond ring on her left hand. “You’re... you’re married?”

“Not just married,” she explained, “I’m a newlywed! I’m married to Albert Carlson. He’s an accountant with the city and several years older than I am but apparently we fell in love—or so everyone believes—and got married. This is my first week back from the honeymoon. All he wants to do is hop into bed with me.”

“You didn’t!”

“I did,” she admitted softly. “It’s hard to explain, but when he got me home and put the moves on me, it was as if my body had a mind of its own. I got unbelievably aroused and...” Judy got extremely red.

I suppose I can't blame her for what she did. I had spent the last day trying to play my part as a thirteen-year-old girl. More than once, I had referred to something as being "cool" with one of the other girls. I had primped and preened and talked about boys with them just to blend in. I could scarcely judge Judy for doing the same. She was supposed to be a newlywed and it was expected of her. What else could she do? Besides, these weren't our real bodies and our real identities anyhow. If I had been in her shoes, I would have probably had sex, too, as disgusting as that thought was.

And okay, Jeff, you're probably wondering if I wasn't just a little bit curious about the experience. Of course I was. I think every guy wonders deep down what women experience in sex. But for most of them, it remains nothing more than idle curiosity—like wondering what it might be like to be able to fly like Superman or be a professional football player or some other fantasy. And that's still the way I see it. Men aren't sexually attractive to me at all, and I have no intention of trying out this body with one no matter how long I'm stuck in it.

"We've got to get out of here," I told her, changing the subject to save her from further embarrassment.

"Like this?" she asked, indicating her body. "Who'd believe us?"

She had a point, and I didn't really didn't know how to answer her. Fortunately, I didn't have to because the warning bell for afternoon classes was ringing. I promised to get back to her after I'd had a chance to think about it.

The afternoon went pretty much like the morning. You have no idea how boring it is to go through middle school a second time. Going back through college might even be a little entertaining, but not middle school. I would have no problem maintaining Carrie's apparent reputation as a good student. After all, there was nothing I was being exposed to in class that I hadn't known for years.

But frankly, I didn't plan on being in Ovid all that long. After all, what was to prevent Judy and me from jumping in her car and leaving town? Sure, that cop, Officer Mercer, or somebody like him might try

to stop us, but what if we didn't stop? I'd have to propose it to Judy. I caught her alone in her office after classes.

"You'll miss your bus," she warned me.

"I'm not taking the bus," I replied. "You and I are going to go out to your car and drive away."

"Sorry," she said. "I already tried it this morning."

"What?"

She nodded, a gloomy expression on her face. "Yeah. I thought I'd just drive away and get help. I got as far as the hills surrounding the town."

"And...?"

"And," she sighed, "I topped the hill and found myself approaching town from the other end. Then I tried another road—same result. Apparently we're caught in some sort of dimensional bubble. Trying to get out just brings you back in. I was twenty minutes late and got my ass chewed this morning."

Dejected, I told her I'd think of something else and headed for the bus. At least I just had to go home and pretend to be a teenage girl. Judy was probably going home to another night in the sack with a creepoid accountant. I suppose I had the better end of the deal.

It's funny how quickly things become routine. Calling the two people who weren't really my parents "Mom" and "Dad" was easier than I would have ever imagined. I suppose when they act as if they're really your parents, it's easier to see them in that light. Even Dad's transparency became a little less noticeable, and when I gave him a goodnight hug, he was as warm and real as any normal person could be.

I don't know if my real parents lived next door to yours in this new reality. But if they did, you probably wonder how I could have tolerated them. The answer is I couldn't—any more than they could tolerate me. That was why I spent so much time at your house. So in a way, it's

actually kind of nice to have a set of parents who love you. Of course, it's very stifling in a way, but since they see me as a thirteen-year-old girl, I suppose their actions are normal. It's not their fault that their daughter has the mind of an adult man.

Anyhow, as I said, in only a little over a day, my life was becoming strangely routine. I helped Mom with dinner and watched a little TV while I did my homework. Of course Dad thought I shouldn't try to do homework while the TV was on, but I think I convinced him I could do both at the same time. After all, it's pretty easy to do seventh grade math problems when you've already had college level calculus.

And of course, I got my usual quota of phone calls. There were at least half a dozen calls from girls wanting to discuss the social news of the day. There was even one call from a boy in my class. His official excuse for calling was a question about our math assignment, but it was pretty obvious he just wanted an excuse to talk to me. Great—I had a would-be suitor. And of course, Wendy called to coordinate outfits for the next day. It took me a moment to realize 'shortalls' were those things that look like overalls only with short legs. Well, I supposed it was better than a skirt.

I hadn't given up on escaping Ovid. In fact, I was even more desperate to do so. Why? Well Jeff, let's just say that being Carrie Summers was starting to be a little too normal. It has to do with being immersed in a role. When you're forced to act a certain way, it starts to become natural after a while. I found myself unconsciously twisting a strand of my long hair while I studied, or giggling while on the phone. I found myself becoming exasperated with my parents one minute and thinking they were really neat the next. That's right—neat.

Even my clothing was starting to feel natural. I had never worn a skirt in my life, and yet I hadn't bothered to change when I got home. I didn't even notice the earrings I wore, but when I had first awakened as Carrie the day before, I had found them irritating and distracting. The bra still felt a little strange, but even with my small, still-developing breasts the support it gave was welcome. As for what was—or wasn't—between my legs, even that didn't feel odd if I didn't consciously think

about it.

I had formulated a plan to escape though, and I'm reasonably certain it will work. The first thing I had to do was find a computer to write out a rather lengthy message. That, of course, is what you're reading now. I got my hands on the family computer and told my parents I had a report to write, so they've left me alone. As soon as I'm done, I'll try to send this to you.

Anyhow, should this reach you, here's the plan, Jeff. I believe the Judge and his minions only gain power over those who are about to die. As for others, they can probably come and go in Ovid as they please. So someone could come to Ovid and try to rescue me, but once I was in their car, we'd be caught in Ovid just like Judy had been. We'd try to leave and bounce right back into town.

But I think there's a way out—even for someone like me. Sure the roads are a trap. If I tried to leave by road, I'd bounce right back into Ovid. There's a small airport here, too, but my guess is any plane taking off circles back to Ovid, too. But what about the open farm fields? I have a hunch I could just take off across one of the fields and make my way out of Ovid.

I'll admit I'm not sure about this, Jeff. How could I be? It's the sort of thing you can only try once, for if I'm right, I doubt if I'll have a second chance. It just makes sense to me as a programmer. If you think of Ovid as some sort of elaborate computer program, you realize that it is too complex to account for everything—even given the nature of its creators (sorry, Jeff, but I can't discuss that with you). So they must have depended upon countering likely escape routes rather than every possible route. Most people probably acclimate to their new lives before they figure out how to escape.

The problem is I'm only thirteen. What would I do once I was out? Odds are good the authorities would just turn me over to my parents without even listening to my story. I can't really say that I would blame them. I scarcely believe what has happened myself. So I'm trapped here until I can get someone to help me—someone who would believe my story and help me get a hearing with the authorities. That's where I

hope you come in, Jeff.

If you can figure out how to get to Ovid and check out an escape route, you could leave a vehicle outside Ovid and we could get to it before the Judge and Officer Mercer know about it. Then we could go to the FBI and tell them what happened to Connie, Dave and me. I can probably get Dave to go with us, but Connie wouldn't be any help to us. I know it's a long shot, but it's the only hope I have. You are—or were—my best friend, and I have no one else to turn to.

Jeff, I've had to add a little more onto this message. It's about two hours after the last part of my message, and I've done everything I can to send the message. Nothing has worked, though. I think the Judge may be more savvy when it comes to computers than I had imagined. I was able to send simple messages with innocuous content, but whenever I try to send this message it bounces back.

I have an idea though. The system we installed at Vulman is very sophisticated—much more so than the simple email program on this computer. I'm going to zip this file and try to set up a routine that will cause this to piggyback on one of Vulman's messages. It's a little bit like the technique the guys who create computer viruses use. If it works the way I hope it will, the next time somebody at Vulman sends an email to Aldeberan, this file will be piggybacked with it and should automatically unzip on your system.

The problem is how to get it on Vulman's system. Naturally, I can back door into it, but I need a faster connection to hack into Vulman's server. Maybe the school has something I can use. I'll check with Judy in the morning. If that doesn't work, I don't know what I'll do. Thirteen-year-old girls probably don't go strolling into a defense contractor's office and start playing with the computers. Thank God though that the email system we installed isn't for classified use. There's probably no way I'd be able to break into that one with the resources available to me now.

So this is it, Jeff. Either this works or it doesn't. If it doesn't, well at least writing all this down has made me feel a little better. It's given me hope. If this reaches you, Jeff, I'm sorry to hit you up for help like this,

but as I've already said, you're my only hope.

Of course, you may get this and decide to do nothing. If you make that decision, I really can't blame you. You could be risking your life on what could turn out to be the demented ravings of a thirteen-year-old lunatic. It's your choice, Jeff. If you make the attempt, thanks in advance for risking your neck. If you don't, well, I hope your life is a good one, and goodbye old friend.

End Message

I looked up from my computer. It was well after five but I hadn't noticed. I wondered if any of my co-workers had observed me with my eyes glued to the screen. I suppose if they did, they wouldn't have noticed anything strange. I often worked late. Without anyone or anything to go home for, working late was what I did best. I don't think anyone had even said goodnight to me as they left.

On the surface, the message was ridiculous. A town run by a judge with magical powers who changed people's sexes and lives? A magic so pervasive that it had spilled over into the outside world and had taken away my wife, my best friend, and everything I had to live for? I shook my head. Somebody had to be playing an elaborate joke on me. Well, I wasn't going to fall for it. I nearly deleted the message, but at the last minute I saved it, shut down my system, and left for home.

I tried to act normal, but everything that I did that evening reminded me of the message. I mumbled "Hi, honey, I'm home," to my empty apartment. I had meant it as a meaningless joke to myself, but the joke backfired. I felt as I muttered the line that there was something missing in my life—something I had had and had subsequently lost.

What if this Andy—or Carrie now—had been telling the truth? What if there really had been a marriage between Suzy Norton and me? Oh yes, I remembered Suzy Norton. She had been in one of my classes at KU. She was bright and attractive—the sort of girl every guy would have wanted to know. Why then would she have ever picked me? I was too shy to say even more than a few words to her all the time I

knew her.

But that was the point, wasn't it? Somebody named Andy Skinner had been my best friend, and in the course of that friendship, I had lost my shyness. Maybe by the time I reached college, I was confident enough to say more than a few words to Suzy Norton. Maybe we found out we had more in common than we realized. Maybe I made her laugh. Maybe we got married.

The empty silence of my apartment became even more oppressive as the 'what ifs' churned through my head. If Andy had been telling me the truth, then the Judge had fucked up my life as much as he had fucked up Andy's. Maybe he had fucked mine up even more. Andy at least, if his story was to be believed, now had a life in which his parents loved him. From what he had said, the Skinners had been unsuitable parents. Of course, he was a girl now, but I suppose that wasn't any worse than what had happened to me. It was as if I had changed as much as Andy in a way.

What kind of beings would have such power anyhow? And why would they even bother doing what they were doing?

I remembered back when I was a kid. I read a lot of science fiction then. Since I had few friends, it was one of those solitary hobbies only children develop. I read a book called *The End of Eternity* by Isaac Asimov. In the book, time travellers often changed reality, making what they called Minimum Necessary Changes. Just moving a bottle across a shelf might set off a chain of events that would alter future history dramatically. Was that what these beings were doing? Were they changing the world by taking people out of existence and substituting other lives in their place? If that were so, had their Minimum Necessary Change disrupted my entire life?

In a way, I wanted to believe it was true. It would explain why my life had turned out so meaningless. I had no friends and no family, and a job that was more routine than challenge. Did it make it better if I could know that it wasn't the life I was really supposed to have?

I was still brooding about the message the next day at work. A restless

night with little sleep had made me unfit company for my co-workers, so they left me alone. I was just as happy that they did, for it allowed me to come to a decision that I might not have come to if mundane reality had been allowed to intrude on my more fantastic thoughts.

What if the message was real? If it was, my life had been stolen from me just as surely as Andy, Dave, and Connie had had theirs stolen. The only difference was that mine had been unintentional—sort of like collateral damage in war. And that meant the only way I would ever be able to get my rightful life back was to help a person I had never heard of who claimed to be my best friend.

There was one problem I needed to solve first—where was Ovid? A quick check of my road atlas showed no town in Oklahoma called Ovid. Database searches online were equally fruitless. I could wander for weeks or months on the highways and roads of Oklahoma and never find Ovid. Of course, there was one way I might find it. If I tried to kill myself, I might come to the Judge's attention. But that seemed a bit drastic and might not work at all. Besides, I had no intention of killing myself just to get into Ovid.

There was one possibility. Andy had said that someone at Vulman had drawn a map of how to reach the town. There might even be a copy of the map in the file. It was worth a shot.

The Vulman file wasn't very impressive. Vulman wasn't a particularly large or complicated customer. According to the file, Vulman had two locations—a sales office in Washington and a headquarters and manufacturing facility near Tulsa. My heart fell as I saw the Tulsa address. So there was no Ovid. But then I saw the install file. There were handwritten notes in that file. The sales rep wasn't anyone named Connie and no Andy or Dave had been in on the install.

"Looking for something specific?"

I was startled by a woman's voice. I turned to see Greta Locke, one of our installers. Greta was an attractive brunette, and as always around attractive women, I got a little tongue-tied.

"Uh... just looking for something and I saw this file. I've never heard of

Vulman Industries.”

She shrugged. “They’re a small defense contractor up around Tulsa. In fact, I installed that system for them.” She grabbed the file out of my hand, spotted something in the file and threw it away. “That doesn’t belong in there,” she said to no one in particular as the wad of paper bounced into the waste can.

“You sure they’re in Tulsa?”

“Right outside the city,” she said. “It’s a Tulsa address though.” She handed the file back to me and walked off.

I wondered if there were little trip wires that required an action once someone started snooping around Ovid. I had no doubt that Greta really believed she had installed the system at Vulman. And if I’d asked Greta later why she had pulled a document out of the file, wadded it up, and thrown it away, she wouldn’t even remember doing it. But I had seen the item she had removed from the file. If I hadn’t read Andy’s email, I would have thought nothing of the item. But now, I reached down in the waste can and pulled the paper out, carefully smoothing it out on a nearby desk. Of course, it was a map.

“No wonder nobody just stumbles on Ovid,” I thought as I studied the circuitous route to the strange town. I wasn’t even sure I could drive there even with the map.

I had a plan figured out in my mind, but it would take a little time to put it all in place. Andy had started me thinking. For all his power, it was unlikely that the Judge or his followers could be everywhere all the time. Andy had compared Ovid to a computer program. Ovid was in some ways like a computer program still in beta test. Not every possible contingency would have been anticipated. I suspected Andy was absolutely right when he said it was probably possible to take off across the fields and escape Ovid. But anyone attempting to escape that way would be moving too slowly to escape for long. Before they could get far, their absence would be noticed and Officer Mercer or someone like him would be dispatched to collect them. That’s probably why they didn’t worry about that sort of an escape. But I

thought I had that problem solved.

Another problem was a lack of knowing just how powerful the Judge really was. Again, Andy had given me some clues, but for some reason he hadn't been able to tell me what he had learned. Maybe he just wasn't thinking clearly. I suppose it was easier to think clearly, when one didn't have to be constantly trying to fit in as a thirteen-year-old girl.

When I got right down to it, there were only three possibilities as to the identity of the Judge: mad scientist, wizard, or supernatural being. Now I suppose a mad scientist might come up with something to change the shape of a human à la Dr. Jekyll or something. As farfetched as it once seemed, modern experiments with DNA might produce such an elixir—or I presumed it would be possible. It wasn't really my field. But even if such a potion were possible, it didn't explain Ovid or how reality itself could be shifted.

That left some form of magic. It was hard for me as a rational computer programmer to imagine anything as unlikely as magic. To believe in magic, I had to accept that there were forces in the universe which our rational set of beliefs could not encompass. I would have to believe that genies came in bottles and witches changed reality with a wiggle of their noses. If Andy's story was to be believed, then magic was certainly possible—even probable. But if the Judge was a wizard in the usual sense, why hadn't we seen other evidence of magic? Surely, he would have to be considered a strong wizard, but that implied there should be weaker ones as well all over the world whose existence was well known.

That left the Judge as a supernatural being. A trip to the library over my lunch hour seemed to give credence to this theory. When I looked up the subject of transformation, mythological stories of gods and goddesses came to the forefront. I nearly dismissed these out of hand until I remembered Andy's message. He mentioned that the Judge chanted something which sounded like Latin. Who led the Latin—or Roman if you will—gods? Why, Jupiter of course. Jupiter: Judge. Coincidence? Then there was Officer Mercer, a policeman who

seemed to come out of nowhere. Wasn't Mercury, the Messenger of the Gods said to appear suddenly? Mercury: Mercer. I was beginning to notice a trend.

I mentally kicked myself a dozen times for coming up with such a conclusion. Roman gods and goddesses couldn't really exist, could they? I tried to think of the other names he gave me. There was Susan Jager. Did the gods have a defender in their myths? I couldn't think of any and couldn't find any in the books. Perhaps she was just a human servant of the gods, along with the blonde who had been in the courtroom.

Even though I had begun the day not believing in ancient gods, the sudden thought of crossing them seemed frightening. I was just a man. I would be as defenseless as any other man in Ovid. Or would I? I began to realize that I had something no one else had apparently had when entering Ovid: I had knowledge. I knew what to expect. If I was right, I would be able to slip into Ovid unnoticed, gather up Andy and Dave, and make a getaway before the Judge even knew I had been there.

Besides, I had nothing to lose by going to Ovid. My life was in ruins—no friends or family and nothing to live for. Whatever I had once had belonged to a Jeff Bradshaw I didn't know. He was a more personable fellow who had managed to get the girl he wanted and was getting on with his life. I began to feel almost as if I was no more in my true body than Andy was. I didn't know if rescuing Andy and Dave would get any of what I had lost back, but it seemed as if the exposure of Ovid might at least be payback for what I had lost. Besides, Andy might be a thirteen-year-old girl now, but he—she—was the only one who remembered who I had been. Perhaps with her help, I could regain that part of me that had been lost.

I arranged some vacation time. Sales had been a little slower than anticipated, and the need for my services had lessened a little. I think my supervisor was actually happy to see me request the time off. I would be one less person he would have to keep busy until the slump was over.

I bought a round trip airline ticket to Tulsa, wondering at the time if I would actually be able to use the return trip. I pushed that negative thought into the back of my mind and mentally checked my inventory. I had plenty of cash; I wanted no record of credit card receipts which might leave a trail. Only my plane ticket and rental cars would be on my card. In Ovid, I would use only cash.

I got a car from Avis at the airport in Tulsa. Then, I checked the Yellow Pages and found a nearby firm that provided day laborers. My requirements were simple. I needed a man with a valid driver's license to ferry a car for me. The rate was a little higher than I anticipated, but I had plenty of cash. I paid on the spot.

I was sure the laborer I had hired thought I was crazy. He was a taciturn man, his face showing the results of a young life wasted with alcohol and drugs. I estimated him to be about forty, but the ravages of his dissipated life might have aged his appearance several years. He went by Mac and I never learned his last name. His hair was long and stringy and he needed a shave. As for his clothing... well, let's just say his hair was his best feature. In spite of the morning Oklahoma summer heat, I left the window next to me down to get fresh air.

I drove him back to the airport area and left him standing by the car as I went into another car rental firm and rented a second car. Then, I pulled my new car up behind him and gave him the keys to the first car. "You understand what you're supposed to do?" I asked.

He shrugged, throwing away the last of a cigarette I had not allowed him to smoke when I was in the car. "Yeah." His voice sounded like gravel falling down a tin chute. "I follow you."

Come to think of it, that was really all he did need to do.

The map was easy enough to follow once I got the hang of it. It took us further and further from any populated areas. In a surprisingly short time, it seemed as if we were the only cars on the road as we passed through verdant farmland punctuated by meandering streams and rolling hills. I expected to see some evidence of Ovid with every hill I

crested, but I was rewarded with only a view of more farmland. I began to wonder if Ovid was really out there somewhere. Then at last, it happened. There in the distance was a town. I pulled to the side of the road, got out of the car, and hefted the binoculars I had bought the day before.

From a distance, the town seemed perfectly normal if a little larger than I would have anticipated from Andy's description. Trees obscured most of the view of buildings, but a few church spires rose above them and a few new houses were observable on the fringes of the town. I could pinpoint where the business district was by the lack of trees in roughly the center of the town. I estimated there were no buildings taller than three stories though. All-in-all, it looked like a pleasant little Midwestern town—the sort of place where people still smile and speak to each other on the street and everyone leaves their doors unlocked. I was having a difficult time imagining the town as Andy saw it.

“Where you want I should park?” Mac asked.

I jumped a little. I had been watching Ovid so intently I hadn't even heard him approach me. I looked around, spotting a copse of trees just off the road and down the hill out of sight of the town. “Over there,” I commanded, pointing.

Mac gave me another one of those ‘you must be out of your fucking mind’ looks. “But there ain't no road there.”

“No fence either and the ground is solid and the trees will hide the car,” I pointed out. “Now park the car and let's get out of here.”

Reluctantly, he started back for the other car. Then he asked me, “What town's that?”

I didn't bother to answer him and he didn't ask again.

The drive back to Tulsa wasn't a particularly pleasant one. Again, I had the window down part way since even the Oklahoma heat was preferable to Mac's body odor. There was practically no conversation between us. Mac was not exactly an intellectual giant, and the fact that I had forbidden him to smoke in the car had put him in a foul

mood. It was with relief on both of our parts as I dropped him off at the day labor office where he could pick up his daily wages—probably to spend them on a few packs of smokes and a quart of cheap wine. Or maybe he was more upscale than I had imagined and would spend his wages on drugs.

I then drove to a hotel to spend the evening. I wanted to get a good night's rest before putting the rest of my plan into action. If everything went right, within two nights I would have rescued two people from Ovid. Then we would have to convince the authorities that there was something strange going on in that town. I expected that to be the most difficult part of the plan.

Looking back on it, I suppose it was rather egotistical of me to think I could foil a plan devised by gods, but I didn't think of them as being gods in the religious sense. I believed then—and to a certain extent still do—that the gods were more like Q in *Star Trek* than beings to be worshipped. They acted more like Q than gods since they apparently chose not to be worshipped as gods. Also, their actions were more like children playing at running a town rather than supreme beings with omnipotent wisdom. Now with the benefit of hindsight, I've begun to think the real answer might be somewhere in between.

In any case, I was confident my plan would work. To quote another *Star Trek* analogy, as Kirk said about the Kobeyashi Maru solution, it had the benefit of having never been tried before.

Late the next morning, I was again driving to Ovid. At least I was driving by myself without having to worry about Mac keeping me in sight. It made the drive almost pleasant. I had grown up in country not unlike the area around Ovid. So many people think of places like Kansas and Oklahoma as being vast treeless plains, flat and uninteresting. While parts of those states are somewhat like that, eastern Oklahoma, like the area around my native Topeka, Kansas, is made up of gentle hills with stands of trees wherever the land hasn't been cleared for farming—and a large amount of the land has been left in woodlands.

The sad thing about some of these rural areas is that there are fewer

people to see them. While cities like Dallas or on a smaller scale Tulsa are booming with new suburbs and a myriad of opportunities, rural areas continue to lose population as farms become larger and less labor intensive. Ah well, it's called progress, but sometimes I wonder...

I felt relief as I crested the hill that allowed me a view of Ovid. I had almost feared that it would disappear mysteriously before I could return. This time though, I wouldn't be viewing it from afar. This time I would be walking directly into the lion's den. This time I would be taking the first positive steps toward somehow regaining what I had lost in my life.

I had been prepared for something more ominous than what I saw as I drove into town. I saw several people going about their business, but they all looked like normal everyday people. There was nothing strange about them. I looked at them intently, hoping to find some evidence of the transparency Andy had mentioned, but there was nothing unusual about them.

If there was anything odd about the town, it was that it was unusually prosperous. But of course I knew that Vulman Industries was a successful company, and sometimes a company like that was all a small town needed to prosper. In addition, I noted signs directing motorists to Capta College. Again, a small college could be a financial shot in the arm for a small community. Since Ovid had both a successful industry and a college, it wasn't surprising that it showed signs of prosperity.

Rather than ask for directions to the Ovid Middle School, I chose to drive around a little. The truth was I wanted to have no unnecessary contact with residents of Ovid. While I was convinced I had determined the identity of the Judge and Officer Mercer, I knew the pantheon of Roman gods was a large one. Any of Ovid's residents might be a Roman god—or in the service of them.

It didn't take me long to find the school. I had followed signs leading to the high school and then fanned out my search from there. As I had expected, the middle school was only a few blocks from the high

school. I had timed my arrival early in the afternoon. I parked the car in a shaded spot where I thought I would be taken as a parent there to pick up his daughter or son. I quickly wolfed down a sandwich I had picked up at a convenience store in the last town before Ovid and settled in to wait.

Perhaps I can be forgiven my ignorance. I had sought to blend in, then look for a young girl who seemed to be a little out of place—a pretty little blonde who would notice me and recognize me. What a fool I was. This wasn't a large city where a person can remain anonymous for long. I was a stranger, and anyone who saw me would catalogue me as such. I had been in place for only a little over half an hour when I was confronted.

I cursed my bad luck as the skirted figure walked out of the school and made a beeline directly for my position. At first, I thought I should just get in the car and go. Then I realized that was the most suspicious thing I could do. I'd have to invent a reason for being there, I thought. Then suddenly I got a better look at the woman who was approaching. She was a woman about my age—mid twenties—pretty with long red hair. She looked like Andy's description of Judy Carlson.

Once I realized who she was, I realized this was the best thing that could happen. Although I didn't remember Dave Malloy, I was certain that this attractive young woman was who Dave had been transformed into. I had thought to use Andy to get to Dave, but now it would be the other way around.

"Sir?" she began while she was still walking toward me. Her voice was high and sweet. "Just what do you...?" Her voice trailed off as she peered at me. "Jeff? Is that you?"

I managed a little smile. "Yes, Dave, it's me."

She turned suddenly and waved back at the school. For the first time I realized there was another woman standing at the school door. Of course. Judy was to check me out. If she couldn't identify me, whoever was at the door would call the police. Then she turned back to me. "What the hell are you doing here?"

It wasn't really what I expected her to say.

"And how do you remember who I was?"

That was what I had expected her to say.

"It's a long story," I said, not quite ready to tell her my plan.

She scowled. "Do you have any idea what will happen to you if someone were to call the police?"

"I guess I just didn't realize a stranger would be immediately suspect," I replied.

"This may be a small town but we can read," she said defensively.

"There's perverts all over the country looking for little girls—looking for little boys, too."

My mouth dropped open. I motioned with my head toward the school door. "They didn't think that I...? You didn't think...?"

"That you were some sort of perv here to bother one of our kids?" In a way, she was enjoying this, damn her.

"I just wanted to see Andy."

"You mean you wanted to drop by the school and accost a thirteen-year-old girl when she got out of classes for the day?"

I could feel my face redden. I really hadn't thought of it that way.

Although I knew I was looking for a thirteen-year-old girl, my email message had been from the mind of a twenty-five year old man. I was off to a bad start in Ovid. Some adversary for the gods I was going to be.

"All right," I sighed. "I see your point. I needed to talk with you, too..."

So we stood there together, talking. I'm sure the people inside the school who had thought me a child molester were now convinced that I must be all right or Judy wouldn't be spending so much time talking to me. They would be alarmed if they could hear our conversation though. I told her about the message I had gotten from Andy. I then began to tell her who I thought was running Ovid. Before I could give

the identity of the Judge, my throat constricted and my voice froze.

“Jeff?” she asked, concerned by my sudden inability to speak. “Don’t bother trying to say it. I know who the Judge is. We all figure it out after a while. But you can’t talk about it. He won’t allow it.”

So I relaxed and could feel my ability to speak returning. So that was what Andy meant when he told me in the message that he couldn’t discuss the identity of the Judge. “Are there any other rules I need to know?”

She shrugged. “There are probably several, but don’t worry. Most of them aren’t as unpleasant to break as that one. Oh, there is one other one you might want to think about. No more than two people can discuss the nature of Ovid together. So even if you did manage to talk to Carrie, it would have to be without me in the conversation or you couldn’t talk about this. For that matter, just why did you come here?”

“To rescue you,” I said simply. Then I added, “You and Andy. Connie, too, I suppose if that’s possible.”

“None of it’s possible,” she said, shaking her head firmly. “Connie doesn’t even remember who she was. It wouldn’t do any good to rescue her. Besides, what makes you think we need rescuing anyway?”

She was becoming the master–mistress, I suppose–of the unanticipated question. “That Judge took your lives from you. For that matter, he took my life from me.”

She frowned. “What do you mean when you say he took your life from you? You’re still Jeff. Granted you look a little different...”

I felt the blood rush out of my head. “Different how?”

She took a moment to look me over. “You’re thinner and paler. You don’t look quite as... robust as I remember you. You and Suzy must not be getting out enough. I thought she had you playing tennis with her a couple of times a week now.”

I clenched my fists and tried to control the anger I felt building inside me. “Damn it, Dave, there is no Suzy—at least not in my life. Back in

college, Andy apparently urged me to ask Suzy out. Because of what happened to Andy, Suzy and I never got together. She's probably someone else's wife now."

"Oh God, Jeff," she cried, gently gripping my arm, "I'm so sorry. I guess with my own problems I just never thought about what might have changed outside of Ovid."

"If the Judge has been transforming people for very long, there must be hundreds or even thousands of lives that have been changed outside Ovid," I told her. "You say I don't look the same. I suppose in a way I've got a new body, too. It sounds as if I'd prefer my old one."

She gave me a sad smile. "Well, the old one was a little nicer..."

"So you see, I have to get you and Andy out of here. We have to find someone outside Ovid who'll believe us and do something to stop this madness. We might even be able to get this Judge to return us to our old bodies and lives."

She seemed ready to say something but held back. She bit her lip in a very feminine way and unconsciously smoothed back a strand of loose red hair. It was hard looking at her to imagine that she had ever been a man. How could she have changed so drastically in such a short span of time? The Judy Andy had described was not nearly as girlish as the one I had found. I suddenly realized that I really had no idea how long she had been in Ovid. It was late May now, and it had taken me a week to arrange this trip. I suppose I thought the message from Andy had been sent shortly before. But Andy had said his message would be sent the next time someone at Vulman emailed someone at Aldeberan. But that meant the message could have been written any time.

"Dave..." I asked slowly, fearful of the answer to the question I was about to ask, "...just how long have you guys been here in Ovid?"

She looked at me blankly. "Why, since early April. Why?"

It was the end of May. That meant Dave and Andy had been their new female selves for nearly two months. What must it have been like for

them, to have submerged their male personas for female ones for so long? No wonder Dave was acting so feminine. My God, what must Andy be like? Probably about the same, I told myself.

“What’s wrong, Jeff?”

“Nothing, I guess,” I managed to say.

“Come on, Jeff,” she insisted. “You may not look quite like the Jeff I knew, but I could always tell when something was bothering you.”

Had Dave and I been good friends? Apparently so. “Okay. I just didn’t realize you had been here that long. I just got the message last week.”

Dave—or I guess I should say Judy—nodded. “Carrie and I were afraid it might be a while before Vulman emailed Aldeberan.”

“And what has happened since you sent the message?” I asked.

Judy looked back at the school. “Look, Jeff, I have to get back to work now. I was going to go to a little place called *The Greenhouse* after work for a drink with a couple of the staffers here. Be there about five thirty. They’ll be going home then and we can talk. My husband is working a little late tonight, so no one expects me home.”

After she gave me directions to *The Greenhouse*, I reluctantly left the school. She promised me she’d talk to Andy—or rather Carrie now—and arrange for us to meet. I did see the logic of what she was saying though. It wouldn’t look right for me to be hanging around the school to meet a thirteen-year-old girl. Of course, come to think of it, it didn’t exactly seem right for me to be meeting a very attractive twenty-five year old married woman in a bar while her husband was working late.

What choice did I have though? I thought as I drove into downtown Ovid. Dave might be a married woman and Andy might be a thirteen-year-old girl, but I knew who they really were. And without their help, I had no way to get back the life I was entitled to.

I parked the car downtown and just strolled around waiting until it would be time to meet Judy. Ovid was a pleasant little town. The streets were clean and the businesses were small but prosperous looking. The only buildings of any size were March’s Department

Store—sort of a poor man's Macy's I supposed—and the Farmer's and Merchant's Bank which seemed to have offices over it. In fact, I noticed on the door to the office floors the names of the tenants—including Susan Jager, the court-appointed attorney for my friends.

An attractive blond woman and an equally attractive brunette strolled over to the office entrance. They were laughing and talking, gave each other a sisterly hug, and parted—the blonde heading back down the street and the brunette into the building. Something told me these were the two women from my friends' court appearance.

More from curiosity than anything else, I followed the blonde just to see where she was going. Of course, I followed at a very discrete distance. My near brush at being tagged a child molester had taught me to be more careful. I didn't want to be accused now of being a stalker.

As I watched, the blonde walked half a block ahead of me. It was a thrilling view. She walked confidently, her firm ass swaying with feminine grace as her high heels clicked against the pavement. In a few minutes, she disappeared inside a rather imposing building—the Ovid City Hall. It didn't absolutely confirm my suspicions, but I was fairly sure in my own mind that she was the blonde in the courtroom.

I didn't follow her in the building. I had no desire to run into the Judge or Officer Mercer. I just continued my stroll down the streets of downtown Ovid.

I made several observations as I walked. The first was how absolutely normal everything looked. Andy had caused me to believe there was something sinister about Ovid, but I saw nothing to indicate that. By then, I would have expected to see one of the transparent people, but I didn't. Everyone looked perfectly normal to me. Yet I had talked to Judy and knew that everything was not perfectly normal.

Unfortunately, my afternoon passed slowly. There was nothing in downtown Ovid to spend a great deal of time browsing over. When I was back in Dallas, I would often stroll through a mall, stopping to spend pleasant air-conditioned minutes in a bookstore or a computer

store. Ovid didn't have much in the way of browsing stores. Oh, there was a computer store—such as it was. It was a Radio Shack. Well, actually, it wasn't even a real Radio Shack. Instead, it was one of those authorized agent stores where they had a few Radio Shack products along with other items. As a computer professional, I had always felt Radio Shack was a little primitive, but any port in a storm.

When I entered the store, I felt as if I had been transported back in time. There were none of the slick displays and flashing screens I had come to expect in computer stores. Other than the old-fashioned bell over the door which tinkled as I stepped in, the place was unnaturally quiet. I looked around and saw, as expected, a number of computer systems I was very familiar with. Over a long table boasting several fairly recent models was a professional but plain sign which proclaimed 'Welcome to Del's Computers—an Authorized Agent for Radio Shack.'

"Can I help you?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin. I had heard no one enter the room. I turned, then had to look down slightly. In front of me was a short man who looked a little like Gomez Adams—even to the pinstriped suit and bow tie. His hair was slicked down and parted a little high, and his moustache was neatly trimmed but a little too thin.

"Can I help you?" he repeated formally.

"Oh... uh... just looking," I said noncommittally.

"Please feel free to look about, Mr. Bradshaw," he said with a sweeping gesture at the long table of computers. "I am Mr. Wolf should you need anything."

"Thanks, I... Wait a minute, how did you know my name?"

He stared at me silently. Then, "A question, Mr. Bradshaw?"

"Damned right!" I replied. "How did you know my name?"

The punctilious little man placed his hands together, one over the other. "Mr. Bradshaw, our business is information management. Your name is information. Therefore, it is our business to know your name."

It took me a moment to realize he hadn't really answered my question. "Does anyone else know I'm here?"

He closed his eyes, as if in disdain. "If you are going to continue to ask questions, Mr. Bradshaw, perhaps you would like to become one of our clients?"

"How do I do that?"

He sighed. I had asked another question. "Upon further reflection, I think, Mr. Bradshaw, that it might be a bit... complicated to take you on as a client. However, in the interest of community relations and all that, I will allow you to ask three additional questions—no more no less—at no charge."

"And you'll answer them?"

"Is that one of your questions, Mr. Bradshaw?"

"Uh... no." I would have to be more careful so as not to waste my questions. I thought back of stories I had read where a person gets three wishes from a genie and manages to squander them. I would have to be careful not to squander my questions.

"All right," I said at last. "Tell me, what is Ovid?"

Mr. Wolf looked disappointed. Apparently my question was not an interesting one. With another signature sigh, he seated himself at a terminal at a nearby desk. I couldn't see the screen, but I could see the keyboard. There was something strange about it. It had additional keys with strange symbols on some and what appeared to be Greek letters on others.

Suddenly, he seemed to go into a trance, looking straight ahead and not at me. He began to speak, but his voice had acquired a resonance which had not been there before. "Ovid: a town in eastern Oklahoma and elsewhere. Population: thirteen thousand three hundred and ninety eight. Principal industry: Vulman Industries, a maker of auto parts and a defense contractor."

He looked up at me, suddenly out of his trance. "Your question was rather pedestrian," he commented, his voice normal once more.

“But you didn’t answer my question,” I cried in frustration. “I wanted to know how Ovid came about and what its purpose is.”

“Then you should have asked it that way,” he replied huffily. “You should take more care with your questions. The last question posed by our most valued client took over an hour to ask.”

Over an hour? I would have to be more careful; that was for sure. “All right. My second question relates to the transparent people. I have reason to believe that some people may view others in Ovid as being somewhat transparent. I would like to know first if that is so, next who these transparent people are, and lastly, why I can’t see their transparency.”

A small indulging smile crossed Mr. Wolf’s lips. “There, you see, Mr. Bradshaw? You can ask a reasonable question if you put your mind to it. It’s still a bit vaguely worded, but it’s much better than your first question.” He typed something into the keyboard, then stiffened once more in a trance.

“The transparent people you speak of are commonly called ‘shades.’ They are real in every sense of the word but are only marginally real on certain parallel dimensional planes—hence the apparent transparency. Origin of the shades is classified under directive Judge 14-793. You cannot identify shades because you are not attuned to parallel dimensional activities and/or are not scheduled for termination. While this is not an absolute set of conditions, it is accurate at a confidence interval of eighty two percent plus or minus three percent.”

Parallel dimensions? Judge’s directives? Termination? I particularly didn’t like the sound of that last term. “Can you...?” I stopped before I could say more. There was one question I wanted answered above all others, and I had one question left to ask. My third wish for the genie had to be phrased just right. I was going to be taking a terrible chance just asking the question.

“I have a plan to escape from Ovid and take a resident of Ovid with me. Will my plan work?”

“It will,” was the response. As I started to feel relieved, Mr. Wolf’s augmented voice added, “unless random factors combine to change the odds. Chance of success is currently eighty point two percent.”

Those sounded like good odds to me, but what had he meant by random factors? I had to ask. “What random factors are you talking about?”

Mr. Wolf rose from the keyboard, his appearance normal once again. “I’m sorry, Mr. Bradshaw. That would be a fourth question. I’m afraid you’ve had your three.”

“But...”

“I’m sorry. Now if you’ll excuse me, I do have work to do.”

I turned away for just a moment, unsure of what to say or do next. Then I turned back to Mr. Wolf, but he was gone. There was no sign of him anywhere. Well, maybe there had been something on the computer screen that he hadn’t told me. If he wasn’t there, he couldn’t stop me from looking. I looked at the computer screen. It was completely dark. And I mean dark. It wasn’t a blank screen, it was completely black—no reflection or anything. Hesitantly, I touched a key. Nothing happened—nothing at all.

When I stepped back on the street, I realized for the first time how absolutely quiet the silence inside the store had been. It was almost as if Del’s Computers existed outside normal time and space. Perhaps it did. There were forces at work in Ovid that I couldn’t hope to understand. I just hoped that like Mr. Wolf, they proved to be benign.

I had been in the store longer than I thought. A quick look at my watch told me it was time to find *The Greenhouse*. Fortunately, it wasn’t far. It proved to be a pleasant little place, more restaurant than bar. Judy was already there, but to my consternation, three other women were with her in a booth. I had thought they were to leave before I showed up.

“There he is,” I heard Judy say. “Over here, Jeff.”

Hesitantly, I approached the little group. Wine glasses all over the

table indicated that more than one round had been ordered. The women were all very much like Judy—that is to say young and attractive. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen a single person in Ovid who was unattractive—except maybe for Mr. Wolf.

"Girls," Judy began holding onto my arm, "this is my cousin I told you about—Jeff Bradshaw."

They giggled and introduced themselves, and within five minutes, I couldn't remember any of their names. I tried to sit and make polite conversation, but mostly I just remained quiet and let them talk. As I said, I've always been a little nervous around attractive women.

Finally, the girls got up. One of them, an attractive brunette, brushed my arm. "Where are you going to be staying in Ovid?" she asked.

"He's staying with Albert and me," Judy replied before I could stammer a made-up response.

"Oh, well say hi to Albert for me," the brunette said. And with a smile, she left Judy and I standing in front of *The Greenhouse*.

"What do you mean I'm staying with you tonight?" I asked when the brunette was out of earshot. "And what's this stuff about being your cousin?"

"Well, where had you planned to stay tonight?"

"I hadn't decided," I lied. Actually, I had decided. My initial plan had been to find Andy coming out of school, have her locate Dave, and have the three of us out of Ovid by nightfall. It wasn't working out that way though. It was obvious I wouldn't see Andy until the next day, and come to think of it, Judy hadn't seemed too excited about the prospect of leaving Ovid. I knew better than to check into a local hotel.

"You were going to sleep in your car tonight, weren't you?" she said. Had it been that obvious?

"What's wrong with that?" I asked.

"So you planned to just park someplace, sleep in the car, and show up tomorrow looking like a derelict and pull a thirteen-year-old girl out of

school.”

“Well...”

“Jeff, I’m trying to help you,” she told me. “But you’ve got to work with me. I’ve made arrangements for Carrie to be pulled out of class tomorrow morning. I gave her teacher some bullshit about updating her records. We’ll have a conference room all to ourselves. It won’t give you much time to talk, but maybe it will be enough.”

“Did you tell her what was going on?” I asked.

“I didn’t tell her anything,” she replied. “I didn’t want to make her nervous all evening. And I just talked to her teacher anyway.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “But won’t your husband wonder about me cropping up out of nowhere?”

She laughed, “Oh, you don’t know Albert. Don’t worry, I can handle him. That’s why I’m passing you off as my cousin.”

She could handle him, too. By the time Albert got home, Judy already had dinner nearly ready. She introduced Albert to me as if I—her cousin—had been planning this trip for weeks.

Albert Carlson was a pleasant man, but he obviously lived in a world all his own. He seemed befuddled at my presence and a little shy around me. But as preoccupied as he often seemed to be, he was very solicitous of his wife’s feelings and accepted me immediately as if I had been in the family forever.

“Uh... were you at our wedding?” he asked me when we sat for dinner.

Before I could answer, Judy chimed in, “Of course he was there, Albert. Don’t you remember? He sent us that... place setting.”

“Oh yes,” he said with a happy smile. Obviously, he didn’t remember.

Yes, Judy certainly knew how to handle Albert.

Later, Judy and I sat on the front porch of their cozy little house while Albert volunteered to do the dishes—to allow Judy to catch up on

family news.

“Judy,” I said right at the start, “I want you to come with us tomorrow.”

She turned away from me. I could swear there were tears in her eyes.

“Come on, Dave,” I urged, using her old name. “I’ve found a way to get us out of Ovid. Then once we’ve told the authorities, we’ll figure out a way to get back to our original bodies.”

“But you’re already in your original body,” she pointed out.

I shook my head. “You said it yourself. I don’t look the same. Not being married to Suzy changed my life. Did you know they’ve taken a lot of surveys that show married men are healthier and live longer than single men? This isn’t my body—at least not as it should be. And then there’s you—you won’t have to be married to that creepy husband of yours.”

“He’s not creepy!”

She said it with so much vehemence I was stopped for a moment.

“But you told Carrie...”

“That was weeks ago,” she said angrily. “A lot has happened since then.”

We were both quiet for a few moments. Then she began, “Jeff, I know what Carrie told you. She told me all about it after she sent the message to you. I was excited when she told me. There might actually be a way out of Ovid, I told myself. Then I wouldn’t have to pretend to be a woman anymore. And I wasn’t just a woman—I was a wife. I wouldn’t have to be that anymore either.

“But it’s funny how things work around here, Jeff. I guess maybe it’s all part of the magic of this place, but after a while everything just starts feeling right. Take sex, for example...”

“Judy, you don’t have to tell me about that,” I said as I felt my face flush.

“Yes I do,” she replied seriously, as she looked me in the eye and gently touched my arm. “I need to tell you because I need for you to

understand.” She stopped for a moment, collected her thoughts and continued, “At first the sex was weird. I don’t mean Albert is into anything weird. It’s all pretty much plain vanilla with him. It’s just that it feels so strange to be... penetrated.”

She laughed nervously. “The first time we... we did it, I thought I’d lose my mind. I was a man, and what I was doing wasn’t natural. But when we were... together, it felt very, very good. I think that frightened me more than it would have if it hadn’t felt good. I think even then I realized I could get to like sex as a woman. We really do experience more pleasure in sex than men do.

“Then after a while, it started feeling more and more natural. I finally had an orgasm and then another. Jeff, you can’t believe what they feel like. It’s not as intense as a man’s orgasm, but its satisfying beyond my ability to explain it. Pretty soon, I began to forget what it was even like to have a penis. What was between my legs now felt... well, natural.

“And as for Albert, I think what I first thought was a little creepy about him turned out to be just shyness. I think a lot of newlyweds probably come back from the honeymoon wondering what the rest of married life is going to be like. It weirds them out a little bit. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I was afraid I did. “You’re saying you want to stay here in Ovid.”

She nodded. “Please try to understand. I have a good life here. Albert and I are even talking about having children.”

I hunched over and looked at her with as serious an expression as I could muster. “Judy, have you ever heard of the Stockholm Syndrome?”

She shook her head.

“It’s what happens when a person is held against his or her will and starts to eventually sympathize with the abductor.”

She actually giggled, much to my dismay. “Is that what you think has happened here? Albert isn’t my captor; he’s my husband.”

“Is he transparent?”

“You really can’t tell?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Well no, he isn’t transparent,” she explained. “I guess he was probably someone else before he came to Ovid, but we don’t talk about it. He only remembers his life here. So you see, Albert is as much a ‘victim’ of Ovid as I am—maybe more so since his previous life was taken from him. Your Stockholm Whatever seems as if it wouldn’t apply unless I was married to Officer Mercer or something.”

She had me there. “Judy, are you sure this is what you really want—to stay here in Ovid?”

“Yes,” she affirmed with a nod of her head. “I want to stay here, make Albert happy, and raise a bunch of kids.”

A bird in a gilded cage, I thought to myself. I didn’t remember Dave as a man, but apparently we had once been friends. This was not Dave though—not a man who could be my friend. This was a stranger. Well, I couldn’t force her to leave Ovid—certainly not by the overland route we would have to travel. It would have been better to have her along. With both Dave and Andy telling the authorities about Ovid, the story would have more weight.

In a strange sense though, I could understand her point. She had been immersed into the existence of Judy Carlson. It had become a familiar, even enjoyable, existence. She had no wife or children waiting for her outside Ovid. Why not stay and make a life of it? In a small town, an accountant was a respected professional. She’d have a good, comfortable life. Maybe even Connie would be okay with her new life as a boy.

I knew though that Andy would be with me. As I lay in bed in the guestroom, I pulled out the printout of Andy’s message to me which I had carefully included in my small overnight bag. I read it again to reassure myself that I was doing the right thing. Andy’s plaintive pleas to be rescued from her new life were clear. Dave might have

reconciled her transformation to Judy as a good thing, but Andy would not. Tomorrow I would get Andy out of Ovid.

I knew it wouldn't be easy. I was up against gods with unbelievable power. But they had established rules to govern the conduct of Ovid, and I suspected that their powers were somewhat limited. Since I was not about to die, I was of little interest to them, and I had done my best to maintain a low profile in their town. And since I would be taking Andy out cross-country, I would trigger none of the usual alarms designed to prevent Ovid's denizens from leaving. Even if they had noticed me before our escape, they would think they had me safely bottled up since my car would still be in Ovid. They wouldn't know about the other car.

Of course, once we made it back to the car I had hidden the previous day, our trials would be just beginning. The only proof that I had to offer the authorities was Andy, and who would believe the mad ramblings of a thirteen-year-old girl? But they would believe her when they found out that her fingerprints matched no known runaway or abductee and that she had the mind of a twenty-something computer expert. They'd still be sceptical but they would have to believe something was wrong.

Then we'd return to Ovid. I doubted if even the Judge and his associates would be able to hold back the authorities. We'd force the Judge to change Andy back and give us both back our lives. If he could change Andy into a young girl, he could surely change her back again.

My only immediate concern was that I might have raised an alarm when I went into the Radio Shack, since the store was obviously part of the supernatural fabric of Ovid. I looked in a book I had brought along detailing the names and attributes of the Roman gods and could find no one who matched the description of Mr. Wolf or who had a name vaguely similar to his. I was relieved for a moment until I remembered the officially, the store was Del's Computers. I looked up any reference beginning with 'Del.' That's when I learned about the Oracle of Delphi.

The Oracle of Delphi was apparently under the auspices of the god Apollo. I looked up Apollo and found to my dismay that one of his primary symbols was the wolf. Mr. Wolf. With a sinking feeling, I realized that my presence in Ovid was no longer a secret. If the Oracle knew, then any of the gods could know. But was that information conveyed to them automatically, or was it available only upon request? I had no way of knowing. The fact that they had not already tracked me down led me to believe that the latter case was true. Mr. Wolf was so officious I suspected the Oracle enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy. No matter what, though, I'd have to move quickly. Hopefully, I could meet with Andy and we could be on our way at once.

Albert had already left for work when Judy got me up. She fixed me a quick breakfast of cereal and juice and we were soon on our way to meet with Andy.

"Try not to be too surprised at her," Judy cautioned as she drove. I had let her drive me to the school. It was only a couple of blocks to the edge of town, so there was no sense in driving those two blocks, leaving the car, and giving the gods clues as to which way we had run. I had left my rental car parked a couple of blocks from Judy's house to try to keep her out of the fray.

"Why would I be surprised?" I asked her as I checked over my backpack. I had prepared everything I thought we would need to hike out of Ovid—water, food, a first aid kit. I had a sudden feeling I should have brought a gun. It wouldn't have mattered though. I wasn't any good with a gun. Besides, how much good could a gun do against gods?

"Just think about what I said when you see her," was all she said in reply.

Judy ushered me to a conference room that was not on the main corridor. She had thought it would be more private. "I'll go get her now," she told me. Then, before she left, she turned back to face me. "Jeff, I won't see you again before you go, I guess. Even if I did, three of us can't talk about the nature of Ovid together, so I wouldn't be able

to say what I wanted to say. I just want you to know I appreciate everything you tried to do for me. I hope no matter what Carrie decides that you can get out of Ovid.”

“Is Ovid that terrible?” I asked wryly.

“Of course not. It’s not terrible at all once you get used to it,” she clarified. “I just meant I know Ovid isn’t right for everyone, and you want your old life back so badly I... Well, I just hope you get what you came for—one way or the other.”

“Thanks, Judy.”

She surprised me by giving me a big hug, and when she walked away, I saw the glint of a tear in her eye. “Good-bye, Dave,” I whispered, too softly for her to hear.

I waited impatiently for Carrie to show up, idly watching as students walked past the conference room window. They looked like students looked anywhere, except maybe for the fact that I saw no spiked hair and torn T-shirts. They were all good looking kids, reasonably well groomed and well dressed. More girls wore skirts than I suspected would be the case outside of Ovid but...

There—that little brunette. I noticed her because she was very cute, but there was something odd about her, I thought. Maybe it was a trick of the light reflected off the glass. I jumped up and looked out the door. No, I had been right the first time. She was transparent. For the first time, I realized what Andy was talking about in his message to me. She wasn’t ghostly; it was just that I could somehow make out what was on the other side of her. What had Mr. Wolf called them—shades?

My heart was beating quickly now. I had not been able to see the shades before. Why could I suddenly see them now? What was it that Mr. Wolf—or rather the Oracle through him—had told me about the shades? Oh right, I wasn’t able to recognize shades because I either couldn’t see something from a parallel dimension or I wasn’t scheduled for... termination. Oh shit!

Numbly, I made my way back to the conference room table. I sat down

heavily in a chair. Termination. Death. I was due to die. But why? What had changed from earlier? I had to think it out. To make matters worse, what had Judy told Carrie? Oh yes—it was something about the Judge becoming interested in a person once they were supposed to die. Did that mean I was on the Judge's radar screen now? I would have to move fast. Where was Carrie?

"Jeff? Is it really you?"

The voice was soft, sweet and very feminine. I turned my head toward the door. Although I knew in an instant that this was my forgotten friend, Andy, I gasped at the figure in front of me. I was gazing at an individual who was not yet a woman but was more than a child. Her angelic face was framed with soft curls of pure golden hair, cut to fall just over her creamy shoulders. She wore an orange tank top which did little to disguise her breasts. They were girlishly small but showed promise of flowering into voluptuous womanhood. Her waist was so slim I almost thought I could put my hands around it, and her hips had only begun to flare. I couldn't see her legs, encased as they were in flared jeans, but I suspected there were slender and feminine like her arms. There was red polish on her short but femininely trimmed fingernails, and matching polish could be seen on the small toes that peeked out through the straps of her heeled sandals.

"Andy?" I gasped.

She absently brushed a wayward strand of hair back from her face. "I guess."

"You guess?"

She rushed over to me and touched my arm. I felt an ashamed thrill from her touch. This was only a child but what a beautiful child.

"Oh Jeff, why did you have to be such a good friend?" she asked. She seemed on the verge of crying.

"Huh?"

"I... I gave up hope when I never received an answer to my message," she explained. "I need to tell you the whole story."

I shook my head. "There's no time. We have to get out of here right away."

"But... why?"

I quickly explained to her how I had never been able to detect the shades before that morning and what I suspected it meant.

"Oh Jeff," she said, touching my arm again, "you've got to get out of here now."

"Are you coming with me?" There was no time to be anything but blunt. I had come to rescue Dave and Andy. Dave had made his choice to remain Judy forever. If I was ever to have even a small chance of regaining all that I had lost, Andy—or Carrie—had to come with me now.

"How's Susan?" she asked me suddenly.

I closed my eyes. "There is no Susan—at least not in my life. I'm single and always have been."

"I'm so sorry, Jeff." There was a note of pity in her voice.

"Are you coming with me?" I asked again, picking up the small backpack of essentials that I had brought along. To my relief, she nodded. "Then let's go now."

It was an effort for her to keep up. The heel on her sandals wasn't large, but it was enough to slow her down. Add to that the fact that I doubt if she even topped five feet and her legs were much shorter than mine. We didn't speak as we walked. I was nearly breathless from unaccustomed exercise and Carrie was out of breath just trying to keep up. But in a few minutes, we had reached the edge of town. Only a barbed wire fence segregating a pasture from the developed edge of town lay in our way.

I held the wire open for Carrie while she snaked in between the lines. She nearly stumbled, causing me to have to catch her before she fell. She weighed practically nothing I realized. "Thank you," she said with a sweet, sad little smile.

I think it was at that moment for some reason that I realized I had done the wrong thing. "Carrie, stop."

She stopped there at the edge of the pasture and turned toward me. I could see worry and even a little fear in her face. "What, Jeff?"

"You're like Judy, aren't you?"

"What?"

"You don't want to leave Ovid, do you?" I asked, fearful of her answer.

"Jeff, let's just get you out of here," she said, dodging my question. "We can talk later."

We trudged across the pasture in the bright morning sun. I asked her no more questions; I was afraid of her answers. I had the feeling I had made a terrible hash of things. But how was I to know? I had received a message that begged for my help. In that message, I had seen the chance to put my own life straight as well. But I hadn't realized the awesome power Ovid held over its... what? Prisoners? Victims? Or were they something else?

It took nearly two hours to angle back across the fields to cross the road where I had left my car. We were both hot and tired, the hike more than either of us were used to.

"There it is," I said, pointing to the clump of trees which hid the car. I practically ran for the hidden vehicle, and that mindless rush was very costly. Running past the bushes which completely hid the car, I heard a muffled scream from Carrie behind me. Before I could react, a large figure burst out of the bushes in front of me. I noticed first the gleaming pistol he held in his hand. Looking up into his face, I had a sick feeling. It was Mac.

Mac grinned maliciously at me. "Thought you'd be back this morning," he said. "What did you bring with you?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused.

"Don't play me for a fool," he growled. "I know how these things work."

He inclined his head toward the hidden car. "That's a getaway car. You and your little chickee here rob a bank or somethin'?"

"No, it's nothing like that!" I protested.

"Hey Mac!" a voice behind me called. I turned my head to see someone who looked even bigger and meaner than Mac. "This here's a kid."

I nearly rushed the ape that held Carrie. I knew it would be a stupid move but one look at the fear in her eyes was almost enough to make me do it anyway. I forced myself not to move though. I had to look for an opportunity before I did anything.

"She's kinda cute, don't ya think?" the ape said, grinning to show a mouth full of blackened or discolored teeth.

"Yeah," Mac agreed with an equally disgusting grin. We can take her with us an' play with her as soon as our pal here gives us whatever he got in town."

"I didn't get anything in town," I insisted. "I'm not a bank robber or anything. I just..." My voice trailed off. The real reason I had gone to Ovid would have been hard enough for an intelligent man to comprehend. Those two thugs probably couldn't even conceive of something like Ovid.

Then I realized why I was suddenly able to see the shades in Ovid—I was about to die. It had depended upon my making the decision to leave town when I did. If I had decided to wait until later, say to leave under cover of darkness, Mac and his accomplice would have probably tired of waiting and contented themselves with stealing the car. But I had decided to head for the car during the time frame they would be there. Now, I was going to die for my decision. And to make it worse, Carrie was going to suffer, too.

My god, I thought, they're going to rape her. She's just a thirteen-year-old girl and they're going to do terrible things to her. And it's all my fault. I never should have come to Ovid. I never should have talked Carrie into leaving with me. I never...

“So you tryin’ to tell me you did all this and didn’t take nothin’ with you?” Mac sneered. “My mama didn’t raise no fools.”

“Hey Mac, he took somethin’. He took the kid here. Maybe he kidnapped her. Maybe she’s worth money.”

“Bring her over here,” Mac ordered. “Let’s hope you’re right, Jake. If you ain’t, I’m gonna be pissed.”

I hated to think what that might mean for both Carrie and me.

Mac inspected her as Jake held her tight. “You don’t look like nothin’ special. Your daddy rich?”

I don’t know what Carrie would have answered for herself. Before she could give a muffled reply, an unfamiliar voice called out, “Drop your gun and you—let the girl go.”

I swung around to see a slender man in a police uniform standing closer than I would have imagined he could be. He wore mirrored glasses to hide his eyes, but it was obvious that they were focused on Mac and Jake. There was a formidable weapon in his hand, and it was trained right at Mac.

Mac didn’t bother with a reply. He quickly fired his weapon at the officer, but the sound seemed to be coming from two directions. It was followed almost instantly by a loud smack as two pieces of metal nearly fused together and dropped midway between them.

“He hit your bullet!” Jake exclaimed. “That’s fuckin’ impossible.”

I didn’t have to see his nametag. I realized at once that I had just met Officer Mercer. I hoped for Mac’s sake that he dropped his weapon. I doubted if the swiftest of the gods would give him a second chance.

“Drop the gun,” Officer Mercer said again, but this time, there was a coldness in his voice which could not be misunderstood. Even a cretin like Mac knew his life was on the line, and like most men of his ilk, he was essentially a coward. Carefully, he laid the gun down on the ground.

Officer Mercer turned his attention to Jake, but the big man had

already released Carrie. She ran to me and threw her arms around me, hugging me tightly as she could as she cried softly. I couldn't remember Andy, of course, but I couldn't imagine this would have been his reaction. I gently put my arm around what I knew to be a thirteen-year-old girl with no trace of Andy in her.

"I'm sorry, Carrie," I said softly, feeling relief in the sudden tears in my own eyes.

We just stood there while Officer Mercer placed the two men in the caged back seat of his police cruiser. It was only a short distance from us, and how it had gotten there was beyond me. I had a sneaky hunch he hadn't driven it there. Then he walked back over to us. "We need to go," he told me. "Follow me into town in your car."

I looked at him, surprised. "You trust me to follow you?"

There was something like a small smile on his lips. "Where else can you go?"

Where else indeed?

I did as I was told, carefully following Officer Mercer into town. Carrie sat silently beside me, her small body still shuddering with residual fear.

"Andy, I'm sorry," I said, hoping my use of her masculine name would shake her out of her mood.

"It wasn't your fault," she replied, barely audible. "I'm the one who asked you to come here. It's all my fault!" The last word was swallowed in a sudden cry and burst of tears.

What did Ovid do to its victims? I thought. It not only changed them physically but mentally as well. I had mentioned the Stockholm Syndrome to Judy, but what really happened was even more pervasive than that. This was not merely a matter of sympathizing with an abductor. Carrie had become sympathetic with her new life. She wasn't just acting like a thirteen-year-old girl to fit in until a rescuer came—she was a thirteen-year-old girl.

"It'll be okay," I told her, patting her on the shoulder as I drove.

“No it won’t!” she cried. “Jeff, I don’t know what he’ll do to you, but you tried to mess with his plans. Let me out here and I’ll be okay. Just turn around and get away while you can.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, Carrie,” I said, using the name I now knew she preferred, “you and I both know there’s no getting away from Ovid. Besides, even if I got away, there’s nothing for me back in Dallas now.”

“I... I guess.”

We pulled into the parking lot, but before I could get out of the car, Carrie jumped across the seat and planted a kiss on my rough cheek with her soft lips. “Good luck, Jeff.”

There were no preambles as there had been with Andy, Dave and Connie. We were all led directly to the courtroom. At least Carrie and I were walking under our own direction. Mac and Jake seemed to stumble along as if they were puppets on strings. They would look about and try to speak, but something was holding them back.

I felt while remembering Andy’s message that I had already been in the courtroom. As expected, an attractive blonde sat by herself in the gallery, watching as we paraded to the bench. Ahead and on the left, an attractive brunette in a professionally cut gray suit stood waiting for us. I wondered if she was a goddess as I had suspected. I supposed I would never know now. My fate was surely not to be a pleasant one.

“Both of you, sit here,” Officer Mercer ordered ushering Carrie and I to seats next to the attorney who could only be Susan Jager.

I quietly introduced myself to Susan, touching her hand for the first time. She seemed warm and human and there was a friendly smile on her face. Perhaps I had been wrong about her. I looked around and saw that Mac and Jake were now ramrod stiff before the empty bench. It wasn’t that they had naturally adopted a military bearing; they were being forced to stand rigidly at attention. At least they had enough intelligence to look frightened.

“We haven’t much time,” Susan told us. “Carrie, when Officer Mercer

calls the court in session, I want you to go back and sit next to Cindy." She motioned with her head at the blonde in the gallery.

"But I want to stay with Jeff!" she cried plaintively.

"I'm sorry," Susan replied with a shake of her head. "That just won't be possible. If you want Jeff to have any chance at all, you'll do what I say."

"But what's going to happen to him?"

"I don't know," Susan admitted.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked. I believed her. I knew my life was about to be changed in some way that would have seemed impossible to me once. I was surprisingly calm, though. I think it was because I had nothing worth going back to in the new reality that now existed. Whatever happened to me before the Judge would at least bring closure.

"Just tell the truth," Susan counselled me. "It's the only thing you can do."

"All rise!"

With one last look of concern, Carrie squeezed my arm for luck and retreated to a seat next to the blonde woman Susan had called Cindy.

"The Municipal Court of the City of Ovid, Oklahoma, is now in session, the Honorable Judge presiding."

From Carrie's email message, I knew what to expect. The Judge was precisely as she had described him, but I wondered how many others standing before him realized they were in the presence of a god. Not many, I supposed, but anyone would be able to see that this... being standing before them was more than a small-town municipal judge.

"Be seated," the Judge intoned. We all sat, except of course for Mac and Jake.

"And what is our first case today, Officer Mercer?" the Judge asked.

"The City of Ovid versus Arnold Mackenzie and Jacob Walters."

Charges include assault with a deadly weapon, attempted robbery, attempted kidnapping, resisting arrest, as well as a number of crimes previously committed in other jurisdictions.”

The Judge waved his hand at the pair and Mac came out of the spell talking.

“You can’t do nothin’ to us for stuff in other jurisdictions!” he complained. “I know the law.”

“I’m sure you do, Mr. Mackenzie,” the Judge said smoothly. “After all, you have had plenty of occasions to be acquainted with the law, haven’t you?”

Mac seemed stunned by the Judge’s question, so the Judge continued, “Yes, you’ve been under suspicion of any number of crimes since your latest release from prison three years ago. And the irony is that the authorities only knew a fraction of what you had done. But you’ve always been a wily one, haven’t you? You usually work alone so that there’s no one else to point the finger at you. And on the rare occasions that you do have an accomplice, it’s usually someone you can dispose of. That way there’s no one to split the take with or tell of your involvement. Were you aware of that, Mr. Walters?”

Jake frowned suspiciously at Mac, his fear temporarily abated. “No, I didn’t know that.”

“Not that you’re much better, Mr. Walters,” the Judge added. “I see you had an attorney who managed to convince the court you were only guilty of manslaughter when you were sentenced to ten years in prison. You were a model prisoner, though. You got out in just seven years. It’s a good thing they didn’t have all the facts, eh? Such as what you did to that young teenage girl in Texas when you were only twenty.”

I heard Carrie cry out and watched as Jake’s face became pale. “No one knew about that!” he blurted out before he could stop himself.

“Well,” the Judge sighed, “we could discuss the criminal careers of each of you all day I suppose, but to what end? Let it suffice to say

that neither of you will be missed.” He looked over at Susan. “Am I to assumed, Ms. Jager, that you are still unwilling to act as counsel for these two... men?”

Susan rose to her feet. “That is correct, Your Honor.”

The Judge turned back to the two men before him. “Do either of you pitiful specimens have anything to say for yourselves before judgement is passed?”

Mac began to bluster, “Look, Your Honor, what kind of a trial is this? We ain’t been properly charged, we ain’t got a lawyer, and...”

“You’ll find this a most unusual courtroom,” the Judge said in a tone that brooked no interruption. “You are guilty, not because of what happens in this room today, but because of what you know—and what I know—you really are. As for an attorney, Ms. Jager is always happy to defend those whose cases merit an advocate. Yours does not. The list of your crimes is long and serious. But that list will end here!”

I could actually feel the air around me stirring as the Judge’s voice suddenly shifted into a chant which did most certainly sound like some form of Latin. The words had obvious power, for Mac and Jake began to cringe from their weight. Then I realized they weren’t just cringing—they were shrinking!

Their old, faded clothing became a gray-brown covering which spread to their exposed skin as well. Smaller and smaller they became until each was a quivering mass of the gray-brown fur cowering below the bench. Strange inhuman squeals escaped reshaped mouths and hairless tails emerged from their bodies, lashing against the polished wood floor.

The Judge looked down upon his victims. They could move about but couldn’t run away. “Now you have a form which will fit your true natures. You will be cunning but cowardly, and you will spend the rest of your lives doing what you do best—hiding in the shadows. You will eat, sleep, and breed as what you have become, but forever you will remember who you were and what you have lost.”

The Judge waved his hand and the two newly-formed rats disappeared in a bright flash of light.

"I wonder what the rats who mate with them will think of them," I whispered to Susan.

"It won't be a problem," she whispered back. "One of them is now a female rat."

"Which one?"

"Does it matter?"

I supposed that it didn't.

"Officer Mercer," the Judge ordered, "you may now allow spectators in the gallery."

I turned as the doors to the courtroom opened without anyone touching them. To my surprise, dozens of people began to file in. It was at that moment that I realized I had only witnessed the preliminary act. I was about to become the main event. The people entering the room were both real and shade, but all seemed to glance in my direction long enough to show their disgust of me.

"Jeff, we need to talk," Susan said with a hand on the back of mine.

"They... they think I'm a... a..."

"They think you're a kidnapper," she finished for me. "They think you took Carrie against her will. They've had plenty of time to get worked up this morning ever since Carrie was reported missing."

"Oh my God!"

"They think at best you would hold her for ransom," she continued, "and at worst... well, you can imagine what they think."

"But I'm not a child molester!" I protested. "Andy was my friend—even if I couldn't remember him. I only wanted to help him get back his own life—and to get my own life back as well."

Susan looked me straight in the face. "Jeff, considering the fact that you apparently knew what you'd be facing in Ovid, I don't know

whether to call you the bravest man I've ever known or the stupidest. Many of us stumble on Ovid. Sometimes we're guided here by the Judge and his clan. Sometimes, we just wander into it. But you are the first person I have ever known who dared to come here knowing what he was facing. You do know who the Judge is, don't you?"

"I know," I said dismally, trying to shut out the angry muttering going on just behind me.

"So why did you do it? I have to know if I'm going to help you," she pressed.

"The Judge took everything from me when he changed Andy." I saw the look in her eyes. "No, it's nothing like that. But we were very good friends. We grew up almost like brothers. Without Andy to help shape my personality, I'm afraid I botched my life. I lost my wife and a promising future. When I got his plea for help, I of course didn't really remember he existed, but I had to help him. I just felt there was something more to my life than I had been left with when Andy was... removed."

"And you really thought you could win?"

"No," I admitted, shaking my head. "I hoped I could win, but I always knew the odds were against me. But I knew I had to try. If I didn't, not only would my life be less than it should have been, but I would know that to be the case. Oh what's the use? You can't possibly understand what I'm saying."

"You'd be surprised how well I understand you," Susan said, but didn't elaborate. "Now let's see what we can do to salvage something for you. I have to tell you, the Judge was not happy to find out about your little plan."

"I'm sure he wasn't," I agreed. "I..."

"Court is still in session, Mr. Bradshaw!" the stern voice of the Judge said.

So it was my turn. "Sorry, Your Honor," I replied, trying to sound as respectful as I could.

“Mr. Bradshaw, approach the bench.”

I rose reluctantly. Apparently, my fate was to be a public spectacle. Well, it would all be over in a few minutes. I might as well wear my humanity with distinction for the small time I would have it, I thought. I wondered just what rats ate anyway. It wasn't that I thought I'd be a rat—rather I thought I might end up whatever they ate.

“Mr. Bradshaw, please face the gallery.”

I was a little taken aback by his order, but anything to avoid his piercing eyes. I turned and faced a mob. There were only two faces in the entire crowd who were not favoring me with a venomous smile. The ever-present Cindy appeared a little sympathetic to my plight—much to my surprise. I had thought her to be one of the Judge's cohorts, perhaps even a goddess. And the other, of course, was Carrie. She sat with her hands in her lap and tears in her eyes as she watched me in my shame. Oh Carrie, I thought, why did it have to end like this?

But as I watched the audience, they seemed to slow in their movements, at last coming to a complete halt. There was no mumbling or shuffling of feet. Their eyes continued to stare at me with vehemence, but they didn't move at all. Then, I saw faint movement. It was Cindy who was gently patting Carrie's hand. I heard Carrie sniff. I looked at Susan. She, too, was still mobile as was Officer Mercer—naturally.

“Face me again, Mr. Bradshaw.”

I turned slowly, looking as bravely as I could into those cold blue eyes.

“I wanted you to see the trouble you nearly caused,” he told me, his voice measured anger. “You and your little playmate nearly disrupted a plan that has been carefully crafted for many years. Before I pass judgement on you, I want to know just how you came up with this scheme of yours.”

“Your... Your Honor?”

I turned my head and saw Carrie on her feet.

“Ms. Summers, you are out of order.”

“I... I know, Your Honor,” she replied, her voice betraying her nervousness. “But I’m the one you should be... I mean, I’m the one who deserves...”

“Punishment?” the Judge finished for her.

Carrie turned pale. “Uh... yeah... I guess.”

I was the answer of a frightened young girl.

I wanted to speak up for her—to protect her from the Judge’s wrath, but before I could speak, Susan interjected, “Your Honor, perhaps we should hear from Ms. Summers first. It might put things in perspective.”

I expected the Judge to respond angrily, but instead he said, “Perhaps that might be best. Ms. Summers, you may approach the bench.”

Hesitantly, Carrie made her way past the frozen spectators until she stood beside me. “Your Honor,” she began, “I’m the one who asked Jeff to come here. I’m the one who suggested a plan for getting away. This is all my fault. I’m... I...” She broke down in tears, letting up a little when I gently touched her arm.

“Ms. Summers.”

We both looked up at the sound of the Judge’s voice. He was holding a computer diskette in his hand. “I’m aware of your part in this,” he said, “although I wasn’t until this morning. The Oracle was good enough to finally give me a copy of your email. I must give you points for creativity I suppose.”

“And, Your Honor,” Susan added, “I should point out that Carrie hadn’t been in Ovid very long when she wrote that email.”

The Judge looked at Susan for a moment. It was easy to tell she had faced him many times, for there was an unspoken communication which seemed to go on between them. The fact that Susan even knew about the email meant she and the Judge had talked before the trial. “I assume you would like Carrie to testify as to what happened after she

wrote this message.”

Susan just smiled.

“Very well,” the Judge sighed. “Ms. Patton, if you would come forward.” The blonde made her way to stand before the bench. “Ms. Patton will assist us in Ms. Summers’ testimony,” the Judge explained to us. Then, to Ms. Patton, he added, “Start immediately after the email message was written.”

Ms. Patton closed her eyes and seemed to be going into some sort of a trance. Before I knew it, I was feeling very strange. Was this the beginning of my transformation? No, the Judge seemed to be in a trance as well. I felt almost as if I was falling as the courtroom faded away. Suddenly, out of the darkness, there was a room—a girl’s room...

My message written, there was nothing I could do until morning. ‘Andy, my boy,’ I thought to myself, ‘you’re half way there.’ Now all I had to do was figure out a way to get the message out on the Vulman network. As I sat there in my room studying, I found it hard to concentrate. I kept thinking, ‘what if the school’s system won’t connect either?’ There had to be another way.

I sneaked into my parent’s room and snagged the phone book. Maybe I could find something in the Yellow Pages. Who else besides the school might have a system I could use. The city? Fat chance. The last thing I wanted to do was try to send the message from the Judge’s backyard. There was a college in town, I noticed. Maybe. But how would I get there? I couldn’t drive. Besides, I looked a little young to be a coed. Businesses were my best shot, but there seemed to be no other big businesses besides Vulman.

Computer stores! Ovid was a little small for a CompUSA, but perhaps there was a local store I could find. There it was—Del’s Computers. The words were in bold print. Then under them I saw: Authorized Radio Shack Dealer. Jeez—Radio Shack. Well, any port in a storm. I wrote down the address of the Radio Shack just in case. With any luck

though, I'd be able to use the school's system.

My luck didn't hold though. The next morning before classes found me in Judy's office. I paced nervously as she tried to upload my message. Finally, she shook her head. "I can't get it to work."

"Shit!"

"Carrie!" Judy admonished me playfully. "Such language from a thirteen-year-old girl!"

"Yeah, right," I sneered. "You ought to hear the language in the girl's restroom."

"I know," she laughed. "It's the same way in the staff restroom." She pushed back from her computer. "Any other ideas?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," I replied, handing her the note with the Radio Shack dealer's address.

"Radio Shack?"

I shrugged. "It's our best bet. You can drive me down there at lunch."

"What? I can't do that," she protested. "What if somebody sees us?"

"Oh come on, Judy." I tried to make her name almost an insult. "Didn't you ever get one of the staffers to drive you someplace when you were in school?"

"Are you kidding?" she said. "I went to middle school in the heart of Cleveland. It was more like a prison than a school. One of the staffers would have been afraid to take a student someplace. The staffer might get assaulted—by the student."

"Think of an excuse," I told her as I left for classes, "or spend the rest of your life as a good little wife."

I spent the morning in classes not knowing if she'd help me or not. I had been pretty rough on her. And to be honest, I wasn't sure if Dave still wanted to get out or not. He was becoming more Judy every time I saw him—her. At least I didn't have much time to think about it. We had a quiz in history and read a really cool story in English. I had to admit

classes were actually fun. As Andy, I had been mostly a science and math type. I still enjoyed those subjects, but I found now that things like history and English and the other traditional social studies were more interesting than I remembered them.

By the time lunch break rolled around, I had just about given up on Judy, but to my surprise, she was waiting for me outside the classroom. "Carrie, I hate to delay your lunch, but can I see you for a few minutes?"

That had been for the benefit of the girls who were going to lunch with me. "You guys go on," I told them. "Don't wait for me." I didn't have to ask them twice.

"This is crazy," Judy said as she drove us the short distance to downtown Ovid.

"You sound like you don't want to get out of Ovid," I accused her, half joking.

Her face flushed. "That's silly. Of course I want out of Ovid."

Was it my imagination, or was there a lack of conviction in her voice? Surely Judy would want to find a way back to her own life. It wasn't as if there was someone waiting for her back in Dallas, but the idea of having to make love as a woman... It was enough to make me feel lucky. Sure, I was a thirteen-year-old girl, but it would be a long time before I had to worry about the things Judy was experiencing. I was still at the stage where I'd have to worry about pimples and my afternoon math quiz.

"I just can't see what a Radio Shack can do for us," she continued.

"They'll have newer, faster computers," I told her. "And that probably means a faster modem as well. What I need to do would take an hour on a slower computer. And I'd probably have a disconnect before I could finish. Vulman's system won't let me maintain the link very long."

"Yeah, I guess I knew that," Judy admitted. "It's funny—computers were my life until this happened. I guess I've had other things to think

about the last couple of days.”

I could certainly agree with that.

We found a parking spot right in front of the store. My heart fell when I saw it. I don't know what I had been expecting. I guess I thought it would be like one of those mall stores with all the electronic toys in the window. Instead, it looked like one of those shoestring operations that might crop up in a seedy part of a city. There were a couple of systems poorly displayed in the window and a hand painted sign propped up against the glass that said 'Del's Computers.' A smaller plastic sign placed in the window as an apparent afterthought showed the store to be a Radio Shack Authorized Dealer. I braced myself. If this didn't work, I wasn't sure what to try next. I was running out of options.

There was even a little bell over the door when we entered. No one seemed to be around. I was sure a salesclerk would come bustling out of the back room any minute. Until he did, I used the time to look over the systems. There was one in the back of the sales room that wasn't familiar but might be what I needed. “Keep the clerk busy up front,” I whispered to Judy.

“May I help you?”

I jumped at the words. I had been watching the back of the store. Wherever the clerk had come from, it had not been from the back of the store. As I turned, I saw a man—fairly short although still a lot taller than I. He wore a neat blue—almost black—pinstriped suit and a neatly tied bow tie. I know bow ties can be trendy, but this one wasn't. It was red with small white polka dots and looked as if it had been designed during the Nixon Administration. In fact, he looked like something that had dropped in from the past, with his hair parted high and his thin moustache.

Okay, I may be a blonde now, but that doesn't mean I'm not bright. I knew there was no way this guy could sneak up on us like that. But somehow, he didn't impress me as someone—or something—in the same league with the Judge. I had started to form the opinion that the

Judge was more than just a human with magic powers. This fellow seemed for all his tricks to be a little more human.

"I'm here to see about a new computer," Judy said as businesslike as she could. Then she added, "Mr...?"

"Wolf," he said with a faint smile and a slight incline of the head. "Is this a computer for you?" He cast a slight glance in my direction. I gave him my best innocent little girl smile.

"Yes... yes it is," Judy confirmed. She pointed at one in the window. "That one, perhaps."

She positioned herself beautifully, making certain that Mr. Wolf had to look away from me. I took my cue and slipped behind the desk at the back of the sales room, making me partially hidden by the computer monitor.

I looked at the computer. It was a little unfamiliar with some additional keys on the keyboard whose functions were obscure. The extra keys were marked with what appeared to be Greek letters. Presumably, the letters formed Greek words, but fortunately the standard QWERTY keys and normal function keys were there as well. There was no brand name visible anywhere on the computer.

There was nothing odd about the display though. A standard Windows 98 display was there, and in moments, I had accessed the modem and was connecting with Vulman's system. I slipped the diskette into the drive, holding my breath as it clicked in place and began to whir. Fortunately, Mr. Wolf was well into his sales pitch. Judy was doing a great job asking elementary questions and allowing Mr. Wolf to show off his knowledge.

I had a limited amount of time, so I wasn't able to search the entire Vulman site once I got in. I picked Holly Cache's system to place the message. The next time Holly contacted our tech staff, she'd inadvertently send the message. Since she was going to be the system administrator, it shouldn't be too long before she emailed our techs, I thought. Out here in a small Oklahoma town, how computer savvy could she be? I estimated Jeff would have the message in a

couple of days. A couple of keystrokes and the message was sent.

I looked the screen. It confirmed my message had been sent. I quickly logged out, but before I could get up, a strange message appeared on the screen:

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW?

I shrugged. It must be some local demo program. I ignored the message, removed the diskette and slipped in back into a rear pocket of my shorts.

“Mission accomplished,” I told Judy when she had finally told Mr. Wolf she would have to think about the computer. I explained exactly what I had done.

“So now we wait?” she asked.

“Now we wait,” I agreed.

Waiting proved to be more of an effort than I thought it would. I had gone back to classes that day with a spring in my step. It was the same feeling I got as a kid when I would send away for some junky toy by mail. The very act of sending away for it was almost like receiving it. Of course, I forgot the other side of those little activities—the painful wait for each day’s mail to see if my trinket had arrived. But that would come later. Now, my days in Ovid were numbered—even if I wasn’t sure what the number was.

I even decided as the day went on that it might be fun to get into the role I had been given—to explore what it really meant to be a young teenage girl. After all, how many guys ever get the opportunity to see how the other half lives? Then, when Jeff found a way to rescue Judy and me—and maybe even Connie—I’d be better equipped to handle women once I was back in my own body. Well, one woman anyhow.

It’s funny how little I had thought of Peggy since my transformation. I could see her in my mind’s eye and remember the wonderful times we had together, but now when I thought of her, it was like envisioning one of my new mother’s friends. That troubled me, but I suppose it was part of the magic. It was also due to the fact that I was constantly

surrounded by thirteen-year-olds and my interaction with them was bound to affect my thinking.

Of course, remembering my own days as a thirteen-year-old boy, I had to admit that girls that age were a bit more mature. The girls who made up my peer group were childish in some ways, mooning over boys and stuck as emotional roller coasters, but on the whole, they were more mature than the boys. While the girls seemed to be putting one foot boldly into adulthood, discussing serious matters of life and family while attempting to acquire a more adult look in their clothing and makeup, the boys seemed more content to approach adulthood more slowly. They still dressed and acted like boys two and three years younger. They performed and capered in front of the girls, trying hard to be noticed. Unfortunately, as often as not, that notice was not positive.

“Boys!” Wendy muttered with mock disgust as we walked to catch the bus home. Ash McLeod had just nearly run into her as he caught a football thrown by a friend. Having caught a few balls on my own, I could tell that he had positioned his catch right in front of us. It was no secret that Ash had a thing for Wendy.

“They’re just having fun,” I reminded her with a laugh.

“I guess,” she allowed with a little smile. “And Ash is kind of cute—in an immature sort of way, I mean.”

I held back my laugh this time. It wasn’t that I wanted to embarrass Wendy who had added the “immature” comment as an afterthought. It was that when I thought about it—yes, Ash was kind of cute. So when did I start noticing that boys were cute? It was an unsettling thought. It almost made me back away from my resolution to act the part until my rescue.

“Hi, Mom. I’m home.” The greatest thing about my new life was my parents, I thought as I heard Mom call back to me from the kitchen. Carrie Summers lived a family sit-com sort of life, with a nice house and loving parents. Mom’s job seemed to allow her reasonably flexible hours. I guess small town hospitals weren’t quite the administrative

nightmares as ones in cities. And apparently Dad's business was a little slow in the summers, since farmers usually bought their new equipment after their crops had been sold and bank loans had been repaid. It meant we had a lot of time together as a family.

At first, that had worried me. I had thoughts of adults peering over my shoulder. The memories of my own misfit parents haunted me. They seemed to only find time to criticize me or worry that I was doing something I shouldn't be doing. Not my new parents, though. Sure, they questioned, but the questions were more positive. They'd ask the "how was your day" type questions, and I found I was happy to discuss my day with them.

While at home, my decision to enjoy the ride until my rescuer came was a good one. I enjoyed helping Mom with dinner and eating together as a family—something I had seldom done with my real parents. I found I was a good student, and my time spent studying in the evening had a certain comfortable feeling. Sure, I had taken all the subjects before, but it was fun to combine my adult knowledge with what I was supposed to be learning. It allowed me to answer questions insightfully in class and impress my teachers.

Of course, all of that would have given me a questionable reputation as a boy among my peers. In some ways, it was harder to act smart as a boy. Sure, there were some who managed to be popular and smart at the same time, but some boys had never learned how to balance the two and were dismissed as class nerds. Sure, there were some girl nerds, but their nerdy reputation came more from their mode of dress or (yuck) personal habits, such as not shaving their legs or leaving their hair stringy and unwashed or—the worst of all—not using deodorant. But smart girls could be popular, too—like me.

Okay, so I was popular. It didn't hurt that I was attractive. Yes, in a couple more days I actually came to grips with the fact that I was attractive. Sure, I was a little underdeveloped, but I showed promise. It didn't hurt that my Mom was cool and even helped me to dress trendy and all that. And I ran with a popular crowd. Unfortunately, there wasn't a female equivalent of a Jeff in the group. Wendy came

closest, but it wasn't a friendship like Jeff and I had enjoyed. Maybe if I had really been a girl all my life I wouldn't have been so particular, but I found myself missing a really good friend—someone I could really talk to.

Maybe, looking back on it, it was for the best though. Having friends like Wendy showed me what thirteen-year-old girls were all about. I learned what (and who) they did and didn't like, what they wanted, and why they wanted it. I saw girls unwittingly developing habits that would stay with them the rest of their lives. I felt I could almost predict who would be successful in life and who wouldn't, but I suppose everybody feels like that at times.

I didn't see much of Judy over the next few days. Even when I did, it was usually just to ask each other if we had heard anything from Jeff. As the days went by, a subtle thing happened to Judy, though. At first, she would show mild disappointment when I told her I had heard nothing from Jeff, but as the days went by, her reaction seemed to change—almost to one of relief.

"Judy, what's going on?"

I asked her this after about a week had gone by. We were alone in her office just before afternoon classes and I had just told her that I had heard nothing from Jeff.

"Why, nothing's wrong," she said far too innocently to be believed.

"Come on," I coaxed. "You've been acting differently the last couple of days. What's the problem?"

She sighed, "I guess there's no fooling you, is there, Carrie? You've known me too long." She motioned to herself. "Look at me, Carrie. What do you see?"

"Well," I said cautiously, not quite sure where she was going, "I see an... attractive young woman."

"An attractive young married woman," she amended.

"Is this something to do with your husband? What's his name—Albert?"

“Yes, it does have to do with Albert,” she admitted. She was quiet for a moment, collecting her thoughts. “Do you remember how I told you I dreaded having to have... have sex with him?”

I nodded. Of course I remembered. When she had told me about that I realized I didn’t have it so bad after all.

“Well,” she continued, “at first, it was awful. Oh, I don’t mean that it hurt or anything. It was just that I was a man in my mind. Spreading my legs and letting him enter me was enough to blow my mind. Even though it felt good—very, very good in fact—I felt as if I was doing something perverted. But Albert is... gentle with me. He is solicitous of my moods. He knew something was bothering me.”

“You didn’t tell him the truth, did you?” I gasped.

“Oh of course not. It wouldn’t have done any good if I had. Albert just seemed to accept my discomfort as something all newly married couples go through. So he started letting me control the pace of the action.”

“You?”

She nodded. “Yeah, me. Carrie, you have no idea what that can be like.” She had leaned forward and was holding my hands. Thank God I was sitting down. I was stunned by the look of excitement in her eyes.

“You just have no idea the power a woman has in making love,” she went on, oblivious to the look of horror that had to be on my face. “It’s incredible! When you control your lover’s touch and his timing, you can be over the brink before he even gets started. By the time he enters me, I’m already on the Moon.” She looked suddenly stricken, her face red. “Oh! I shouldn’t be telling you this. You’re a little young.”

“Judy, I’m two years older than you are!” I practically yelled in exasperation.

“Well, before, yes,” she admitted. Her tone was soothing—the way my new mother would get when I got upset about something. “But now, Carrie, you have to admit, you’re only thirteen.”

“Not in my mind!” I protested.

She looked at me suspiciously. “Not in your memories, perhaps. I’ve been watching you, Carrie. If I didn’t know who you used to be, I’d think you were just what you appeared to be now.”

I suppose in a way, I should have felt complemented. Wasn’t this what I had been aiming for—to fit in? I had known from my first hours of transformation that I would have to act the part of a thirteen-year-old girl. But had I been acting it a little too well? Judy had known me as Andy and yet she now saw me as a young girl. Had I really become what I appeared to be?

It was the last serious conversation I had with Judy. The class bell rang and I mumbled something about having to get to math class. After that, we just seemed to have nothing in common. She no longer pulled me aside to ask if I had heard anything from Jeff and I had no reason to talk to her. Oh, we would see each other in the halls every now and then, and she would primly say, “Good morning, Carrie.” I would reply with a girlish smile, “Good morning, Mrs. Carlson.” And that would be it.

It depressed me at first. Connie had been lost from the moment of transformation. Now Dave was gone as well, replaced by a Judy who was content to be a woman. It made me feel a little sick to know my friends were gone for all practical purposes. Well, I suppose that wasn’t really what made me feel sick.

“Oh shit!” I yelped when I woke up the next morning in a sticky pool of something. Certain that I must be dying, I touched the liquid along my inner thigh and withdrew a hand smeared with blood. “Mother!”

I would just as soon forget that morning. It had been a Friday and I stayed home from school with my first case of the cramps. Mother gently helped me get cleaned up, talking in soothing tones to me about what it meant to be a woman now. She didn’t have to tell me. I knew what would happen. My body would continue to develop even more rapidly now, my hips widening and my breasts expanding to probably match my mother’s ample size. I could get pregnant now. Oh joy.

She helped me insert my very first Tampon, encouraging me like a flight instructor with a student making his first landing. It felt so invasive to shove the device into my body. I could feel it in there with my sensitive new vaginal muscles. It didn't hurt—thank God! But it didn't feel that great either. It made me feel like I should walk bow legged. I supposed I would get used to them though. If Jeff didn't come soon, I'd be wearing them every month for the next few decades.

I was beginning to think Jeff wouldn't come. Maybe the message was intercepted. Maybe the security in Ovid was better than I thought and they had found the message. Or maybe it had reached Jeff and he had dismissed it as some sort of childish prank. After all, he didn't know a Dave or Connie or Andy. He probably took the email home to Susan and the two of them had a big chuckle over the phony message.

Having my first period was a grim reminder of how overwhelming my change had been. Before it happened, I could tell myself I wasn't really a girl—I had just been transformed to look like one. Having my first period though was a slap in the face. I was a girl—facing womanhood. The mild attraction to boys I had been attempted to suppress would become greater. My body would fill out. It was all so natural, even if it had been devised by ancient gods.

And yes, I knew the ancient Roman gods had created Ovid. It wasn't all that hard to figure out. Even though we were prohibited from speaking of it directly, there were clues. Judy had managed to be prompted by her teacher friend, and before she had opted to accept her new life, she had made certain that she had advised me to read up on the gods. Of course, I had no way of telling how many there were in Ovid, but I was sure there were more than just the ones everyone met in coming before the Judge.

So by the decree of an ancient god and confirmed by a physical passage more ancient than he, I was a girl. And I mean I was really a girl—in mind as well as body. I had surrendered to natural and supernatural forces beyond my ability to resist. Andy was dead. Long

live Carrie.

I must admit, it made my life easier once I had accepted my fate. The next day had found me at March's Department Store with Wendy and a couple of other girls. Since I had been out of school on Friday, they suspected the reason and had called me Friday evening. They were taking me shopping in celebration of my new womanhood.

Women shopping really does seem like such an unfortunate stereotype, but I must defend my new sex on this point. The male body seems more suited for standardized clothing. Check the sleeve or pants leg length, the waist, and if buying a dress shirt, the neck and a man is all set. Oh sure, there's suit coat sizing across the chest, but how often do men buy new suits? But a woman has too many variables to make off the rack clothing a matter of size alone. Then going beyond size, there's color. Women's clothing is available in so many hues I'm amazed that we can get dressed in the morning without picking something that clashes with something else. And then there's shoes and accessories. So okay—we shop.

Wendy and the girls had a mission in life. I was the last of our little group to achieve physical womanhood—as they defined it. Therefore, they were going to help me pick a more womanly look now that I was no longer a little girl. At least that's the way they saw it. Mother had laughingly gone along with the plan, even calling Vera March to verify that I could charge to her account—with a limit, of course. But the limit was sufficient for me to 'fill in' my summer wardrobe.

Wendy's older sister agreed to drive us downtown and pick us up later. She was sixteen and didn't like being seen with a group of thirteen-year-old girls, but according to Wendy, their mother had made her chauffeur us in return for having car privileges for the day.

I had forgotten until my transformation how constrained life was for a teen. Although my real parents had been the opposite, not caring where I was as long as I wasn't bothering them, I remembered friends like Jeff grumbling about his parents wanting to know where he was all the time. There was enough adult left in me that I chafed at parental control a little bit. I was ambivalent, though. Where I resented having

to tell my new mother that I would be shopping in the morning and going to a movie in the afternoon with my friends, part of me was pleased that she cared enough to ask. If it turned out that I was stuck here for life, I at least still had enough maturity left over from my previous life to establish a good dialogue with my parents.

I knew of course where March's Department Store was, so I wasn't surprised by its size. Only three stories tall and covering only a quarter of the block, I had thought of it as a poor man's Macy's when I first saw it before my transformation. I hadn't been in it though, but I really didn't expect much. I was pleasantly surprised when I entered the store with my friends. The store was bright and cheery with the merchandise well displayed. I had expected racks of out-of-date merchandise poorly displayed. Instead, the clothing on the mannequins would have not been out of place in one of the teen fashion magazines that I had glanced through with some of the other girls.

We were greeted in the Women's Department by a person who was easily the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life. Her hair was the color of unblemished gold and styled in a classic upsweep. She wore a well-tailored beige suit that showed every luscious curve of her body, neither understating nor overstating them, rather allowing them to speak for themselves. Her nametag identified her as Vera March, but I knew in an instant that it was not the name she had been born with. Nor had she been transformed as I had been. It didn't take much talent to figure out I was in the presence of a goddess. The name Venus came to mind.

"How nice to see you girls," she said with a smile. Her voice was melodious. Had I still been a man, I would have gladly followed any command that voice might give me. "Carrie, your mother called. I've told Donna what the limit is. She'll help you."

I turned my attention to the woman next to Vera March. I suppose she had been there all along, but I hadn't noticed her when in the presence of Mrs. March's beauty. It was an oversight for sure, because Donna Gorman was very lovely as well in a more

understated way. She wore a peach-colored suit which looked wonderful on her slim body. She wore her hair long, gathered in a loose ponytail which streamed down her back. Whoever Mr. Gorman was, he was a lucky man.

“Hi, girls,” she greeted us. The girls all responded as if they’d known Donna for some time. I found out later that one of our number—Terri—had an older sister who had gone to high school with Donna, although she had apparently been something of a wallflower in her high school days. She sure didn’t look like a wallflower now, though. Of course, I found out why when she was helping me later.

“This would really look great on you,” she told me when we were alone, showing me a very skimpy skirt.

“Uh... I don’t think so,” I told her. I wore shorts or pants as often as I could and tried to avoid skirts as much as possible. Wendy had told me I should wear skirts more since I had great legs, and that just made me all the more determined to avoid them.

“At least try it on,” she insisted, looking around to make sure no one else was listening. “You might as well get used to wearing them. They’re really pretty comfortable once you get used to figuring out how to stay modest in them. I know how hard that can be.”

I looked at her dumbfounded. “You know... about me?”

She nodded. “Vera March told me. She often has me wait on some of the new girls. She thinks talking to me is good for them.”

“Because you used to be a man?” I asked, pretty sure of the answer.

“That’s right,” she confirmed. “You seem a little surprised. Surely you’ve met others like us.”

“Oh yes,” I agreed, thinking of Judy and how we had drifted apart. “But there’s nobody close to me who’s been changed.”

“I know how tough that can be. But you won’t notice it after a while. Now here’s a nice top that will go with that skirt.”

I looked at the short navy blue skirt and the white knit sleeveless top

she had picked to go with it. It did look nice. I didn't have to have very much imagination to imagine how it would look on my body, but...

"Isn't it a little... revealing?" I asked.

"The skirt or the top?"

"Both," I replied. "The top seems to be cut a little low. I mean, I don't have much... on top."

She smiled a friendly smile. "Don't worry about that. You'll probably develop quite a bit over the summer. Go ahead—try it on."

Well, it wasn't as if it was the first short skirt I had worn. And I had to admit, once I got it on I looked good in it. It showed off my legs and was snug enough that my developing figure looked very promising. Against the voice of reason crying out from deep within me, I bought it.

All-in-all, the four of us made Donna's day. I hope for her sake that she was on commission. In fact, we bought so much that she agreed to hold it for us while we ate lunch and went to the movies. I felt a little uncomfortable at the ease with which I had gotten into the spirit of shopping. It actually gave me a perverse sense of accomplishment to match outfits and find the right accessories for them.

Donna was certainly a big help, too. As a young married woman, I knew we'd find little in common besides our transformation. But it was good to know there were more former men inhabiting girls' bodies besides Judy and me. I think in retrospect that it was her ease with being a woman that made me think I could do this after all. And I learned that she had married after coming to Ovid, so unlike Judy she had made a clear choice.

I sat through the movie still thinking about what it really meant to be a woman. To be honest, I don't even remember what the movie was. I remember it had the guy from the X-Files and Minnie Driver in it, but it was just another of those light romances like Peggy always used to drag me to see. I was too busy thinking about my new life to pay much attention to the chick flick. Maybe I wasn't all girl after all, or maybe it was just a so-so movie.

So there I was, watching this mediocre movie while I thought about the pluses and minuses of my new life. Pluses first. I might be a girl, but at least I was an attractive one. Of course, the minus for that was that in couple of years, I'd be beating off boys with a baseball bat. A couple had already asked me out, but I had told them primly that my parents wouldn't let me date until I was fourteen—and it wasn't a lie either. Still, if I had to be a girl, being attractive could be fun. And I was healthy. And girls could play sports now, so I could compete. And come to think of it, I was pretty darned bright, too. If I kept up my grades, I could have a very good future—even if it was in skirts.

But the biggest plus was my family. My parents were wonderful. They were loving and encouraging but not cloying or judgmental. Unlike my real parents, they seemed happy I was their offspring. I suppose to be fair, my real parents weren't consciously cruel to be; they were just detached. But the result had been the same. I had been unloved and unwanted. Not as Carrie though.

Actually, I told myself, I had been given a life that many people would have given almost anything to have. So what were the minuses?

Well, for starters, I was a girl. That meant periods, makeup, frilly stuff, and someday spreading my legs and maybe even having babies. Of course, I supposed I could be a lesbian. I tried to imagine coming on to Wendy or one of the other girls. Nope—I just couldn't imagine it, any more than I could have imagined having a sexual relationship with somebody like Jeff when I was Andy. On the other hand, boys were starting to show promise in my eyes. I really wasn't ready to date, but I had found myself noticing a couple of the boys in my classes. There was something about the confident way they moved and the ruggedness that was just starting to appear in their boyish faces...

The other girls teased me after the movie for being in such a fog. They thought it was over David-what's-his-name in the movie, but they were wrong. Fortunately, I pulled myself out of the fog in time to laugh and joke with them at Potter's, a little drugstore with probably the last of the soda fountains. It was near March's. We had picked up all of our packages from Donna and were just waiting for Wendy's sister to pick

us up. We even found time to flirt with a couple of boys from our class. I found that if I put my mind to it, I could flirt with the best of them. I have to admit it was actually fun to watch the boys fall all over themselves to impress us.

"I think Jeremy Martin really likes you," Terri teased when we were in the car.

"Oh?" Jeremy had been one of the boys at Potter's. "Why do you say that?"

All the girls giggled at that. Even Wendy's sister chuckled.

"I'll bet five dollars he calls her before the weekend is over," Darlene called out. She had been "making progress" as she put it with Jeremy's friend, Morgan. Nobody took the bet.

So then I got teased about Jeremy. It was an envious teasing though. Jeremy was pretty cute, and more than one of the girls had made a run at him already.

"See what happens when your period starts?" Terri teased.

"Yeah, you start getting horny," Wendy laughed.

I started blushing like a... well, like a schoolgirl. But the funny thing was, I found myself hoping Jeremy would call me over the weekend.

He did.

So that's how I ended up dating Jeremy. Well, we weren't really dating I suppose. My parents really didn't want me dating until I was fourteen. But I could study with him, couldn't I? And we didn't have to be dating if we were together with a group of girls and boys and just happened to hold hands. And just because he got a little steamed about me talking with Ron Turner at lunch the other day doesn't mean he was jealous does it? Of course not. And I wasn't jealous when he was talking with Anna Bishop after school last night when he was supposed to be walking me home. Besides, she's such a little tramp. It's okay though. We made up this morning before classes. He even got up the nerve to kiss me. Of course, I told him he shouldn't do it in public, but boys! What can you do with them?

That was when Mrs. Carlson found me and told me I was needed in the conference room. She seemed so uptight that I wondered what was wrong. Well, whatever it was, I just hoped it didn't make me late for class. I wanted to talk to Wendy before class started and tell her Jeremy and I had kissed and made up—literally.

There was a man waiting for me in the conference room. He was dressed casually. He looked a little pale and thin, sort of like a pallid version of my old friend, Jeff... My heart stopped. Oh God, it was him! Why did he have to come now? Didn't he know it was too late? Oh, of course he didn't. Besides, was it really Jeff? No, it couldn't be. But it had to be. What had happened to him? "Jeff," I ventured timidly, fearful of the answer, "is it really you?"

The courtroom slowly returned from the sudden blackness, like the lights in a movie theater after the feature is over. My eyes focused on Carrie as she shook her head as if just coming awake. "It... it was like reliving that time," she mumbled softly.

"I know," I told her. "I lived it, too." I stopped for a moment, then added, "Carrie, I'm so sorry. I had no idea. I thought I was doing what was best for both you and me. I had no idea you were happy here. I should have known though. Judy tried to tell me."

She gently placed her hand on my arm. "No, Jeff, it's my fault. I didn't know how much trouble this would cause."

"Ahem!"

We looked up at the Judge as he ceremoniously cleared his throat. "If you two are finished taking the blame and apologizing, we can get on with this trial."

Reluctantly, we were silent, but Carrie took my hand in her smaller one. As terrified as I was of what the Judge might do to me, I felt comfort in her gentle touch.

"Ms. Patton," the Judge announced, "you may be seated—and the Court thanks you for your help. Ms. Jager, do you have anything else

to present before the court in this matter?”

“No, Your Honor,” she replied to my surprise. Was I not going to be given a chance to explain my own side of the story? No, of course I wasn’t. After all, I knew from Carrie’s message how trials in Ovid were conducted. And I had knowingly tried to foil the gods. I was sure my fate had already been decided, and I was convinced it would not be a pleasant one.

“Mr. Bradshaw,” the Judge began in sonorous tones, “you have been found guilty of the following charges...”

I waited to hear them while holding my breath. The Judge had not specified all of the charges against me. What would they be? Kidnapping? Unlawful flight? Reckless endangerment?

“...contributing to the delinquency of a minor.”

Yes, that, too. Then I realized that it was the only charge he mentioned. I must have looked at him in visible surprise.

“That’s correct, Mr. Bradshaw. The Court recognizes that your actions—while detrimental to our plans—were not illegal.” He gave a smug glance to Susan. “In fact, Mr. Bradshaw, in a strange way, we owe you a debt of gratitude—and Ms. Summers as well. You penetrated a security system which we thought was more than adequate. With your society’s dependence on automobiles, it never occurred to us that someone might simply walk in—or out—of our community. We have also made changes to our communications systems to prevent further use of email to contact outsiders, although I suspect these methods will be found wanting with advances in technology.”

I happened to think that there was nothing preventing someone in Ovid from calling outside, but I had a hunch the message the outside party received would not necessarily be what was spoken. Regular email would probably be handled the same way.

“So all in all, no permanent damage has been done,” the Judge surmised. He nodded to Officer Mercer who returned his nod, walked

to the courtroom doors and opened them. There was a group standing outside the door—all but one of them young teens about Carrie's age. When the doors were opened, all of them marched up the aisle of the courtroom followed by a professionally dressed woman. She appeared to be no more than forty or so, and she was really unlike four of the six teens. The word that came to mind to describe her was sophisticated, but attractive and intelligent would also have applied. She walked directly over to Susan and greeted her warmly.

The six teens—two girls and four boys—lined up next to Carrie and me. Each had the glazed look of the spectators in the courtroom. When everyone was in line, the Judge began to speak again in Latin or whatever it was. I gulped; it was time. Whatever he planned to do to me was about to start.

I braced myself, squeezing Carrie's hand as I felt a faint tingle begin. It started in my head, almost like the feeling I would get when novocaine begins to wear off. Then it spread to my torso, flowing quickly out to my limbs. I could feel my body becoming smaller. Oh God, what was he turning me into?

There was a tickle at the back of my neck, and I watched in alarm as the sleeves of my shirt began to disappear. As morbidly fascinated as I found myself, I couldn't stand to watch. I closed my eyes and felt my flesh continue to reshape itself. There were strange sensations from nearly every part of my body. I was still holding Carrie's hand, but my hand no longer seemed so large. I felt myself forced up a little on my toes and felt my entire center of gravity change. I nearly fainted.

Then, the tingling subsided and I could hear the murmur of voices from the gallery once again. Nervously, I opened my eyes and looked at Carrie. She was looking at me with an unexpected grin on her face.

I jumped a little at the sudden sound of a gavel. My attention was returned to the Judge, but not before I realized I was still human. And I knew from dozens of tiny clues and even without looking down at myself that I was no longer male. The Judge seemed to favor male to female transformations, so that wasn't the surprise. The surprise was that in spite of all that had happened, I was still human.

“I think,” the Judge began, “that in light of the fact that you have all agreed to repair the damage at Dr. Miner’s home following your little teepee prank, I will—at the request of Dr. Miner—drop all charges against you and return you to the custody of your parents. Remember though, any one of you who does not show up at her home to clean up the toilet paper in the trees after school today will find himself or herself back in the courtroom again. Now, I understand that this is the last week of school for the term, so enjoy your summer.”

The Judge smiled as he slammed the gavel down one more time. From behind me, I could hear a collective sigh of relief in the gallery.

I looked over at Carrie. She had changed. Instead of the casual clothing she had been wearing before, she was wearing a white dress that ended just above the knees. It was sleeveless and tailored to make her look a little older and a little more mature. She was also wearing hose and a pair of white sling back one-inch heels that when coupled with her subdued makeup and more carefully styled hair added to that look of maturity. She was looking at me, a surprised grin on her face.

I followed her gaze, looking down at my own body. I was dressed in an outfit exactly like hers. “Oh my God!” I gasped.

“Well, you girls got off pretty lightly,” a man’s voice said behind me. I jumped as his hand gently touched my shoulder. Turning, I saw a man smiling down at me. He was wearing a sport coat that he looked a little uncomfortable in. I guessed him to be nearing forty with just a touch of gray hair and smile lines around his mouth.

“Thanks, Dad,” Carrie said.

“Sherrie, you and your sister are very lucky to get off so lightly,” a woman’s voice said. Again, I turned to see a woman who looked very much like Carrie—and like me, I imagined. “I can understand boys doing that sort of thing, but when I was a girl we had better sense to get involved in this sort of prank.” She was smiling as she chastised us, though.

Susan came up to us, smiling as well. ‘Dad’ shook her hand. “Great

job, Susan,” he said warmly. “I didn’t think the Judge would let them off so lightly.”

“Oh, the Judge can be magnanimous when he wants to be,” she replied with a twinkle in her eye as she looked right at me. “He usually does what’s best,” she added.

I didn’t have to look in a mirror to see who I had become. All I had to do was look at Carrie. I was Sherrie now—her twin sister. It was certainly a better fate than I had expected, but I still wasn’t sure how I was going to like being a young teenage girl. I brooded about it on the drive home, but everyone else was so happy, they didn’t seem to notice—except Carrie.

“This is going to be so neat!” she gushed once we were alone in her room. Or was it my room? She answered that quickly. “Look at this! It’s a Jack and Jill bathroom. Your bedroom is on the other side!” She grabbed my hand and pulled me through the bathroom. “Ooh! I like your bedroom better.”

It looked about the same as hers as nearly as I could tell.

She looked at me, puzzled. “What’s the matter, Sherrie? You don’t look very happy.”

I looked at myself for the first time in the full-length mirror on the back of my bedroom door. Sure enough, I looked exactly like Carrie—or very close to it. “I... I guess this is just a lot to absorb. It isn’t every day I get changed into a girl.”

Carrie came up behind me and put a sisterly arm around me. “Do you remember when we were boys? My family had just moved in. I had left all my old friends behind in Kansas City. You seemed like a great guy if maybe a little on the nerdy side.”

“I was not nerdy!”

“Yes you were,” she laughed. Then more seriously, she continued, “And I felt like I didn’t have a friend in the world. After a few days getting to know each other, you told me we’d be just like brothers.”

“And we were,” I admitted softly, trying not to notice how small and

feminine I looked.

"It will take a few days," she told me, "but we'll get through them together—just like we got through that first summer as boys. Only this time, it'll be even better."

"Better?" I asked, turning to look into her eyes. "Why better?"

She gave me a warm smile. "Because this time, we won't be brothers." She hugged me tightly. "We'll be sisters."

"That's it?" Diana asked as I came out of my trance. "That all happened back in—what—May? It's September. What happened to them after that?"

"I can tell you," Susan laughed. "Their father and my husband play golf together. Of course, most people's memories shifted so most people think the twins have always been there."

"Remember Carrie didn't have any friends who remembered their previous lives," I pointed out. "That means just shades and transformed people without memories interfaced with them. It made Sherrie's assimilation much easier."

Diana nodded. "So considering that Jeff knew what to expect—especially since he was given a glimpse of Carrie's assimilation—there were none of the usual problems."

"That's right," Susan agreed.

"I can confirm that," Myra added. "I've seen them a few times this summer out at Sunset Beach. It was only about a week after they became twins that they were both flirting with Dan Metzger, one of the lifeguards out there."

"Ooh, he's cute," Diana remarked. "Who ended up with him?"

Myra grinned. "He couldn't decide, so he took both of them out that night."

"Their parents let them go out with Dan?" I asked. "He's sixteen and

they're thirteen."

"Fourteen," Susan corrected. "Their birthday was three days after Jeff was transformed." Then she turned and looked at Diana. "By the way, how did you know what Dan looked like?"

For an answer, Diana became suddenly shorter as her skin lightened, her eyes turned blue, and her hair changed from black to red shaped into a ponytail. Her sari became a miniskirt and tight-fitting top. At most, she looked to be sixteen. "Who do you think has a date with him this Saturday night?"

Ovid XIII: The Agent

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Labor Day weekends are always a big deal in small towns. It's the weekend everyone tries to get in all the summer fun that they'd put off for three months before the days got too short and the fall winds promised the onset of winter. Our family was no different.

Jerry was out of town. He had gone to Norman with a couple of his friends to see an Oklahoma football game. I've always liked football, but I wasn't asked to go. After all, what do girls know about football? Wouldn't Jerry have been surprised if he knew that I had played high school ball and had even been a walk-on our Freshman year at Notre Dame? Of course, I was a guy then, but Jerry didn't know that.

Some days it was hard for me to believe that I had ever been a guy. Being Cindy Patton had just become so normal. When I looked at Jerry, it was almost impossible to remember the days when we were fraternity brothers and I had known him as Randy. And Steve and Carl had been Mike and Michelle so long that some days, it was hard for me to remember what their names had been when we were all in college together. There were times when I almost forgot that I hadn't actually given birth to them. And speaking of birth, there was little Ashley. I actually had given birth to her, and as terrifying as it had seemed when it was happening, I counted giving birth as the single most meaningful thing I had ever done with my life—new or old.

Still, in spite of the joys I derived from my new life as a woman, I missed little things, like sitting down to watch a football game. Even when Jerry was home and watching a game, it seemed there was always something going on that kept me from looking at the game. After all, I was a mother with three young children, and a woman's—or more specifically—a mother's work is never done.

All three of my children were in the den watching TV. Well, Mike and Michelle were watching. Ashley was just crawling around, happy to be

with her siblings. They were watching *Clash of the Titans*. I had always considered it a waste of good special effects, but the kids loved it. I suppose it was aimed at their age group. I wondered what they would have thought if they were told that Zeus or Jupiter wasn't a bearded figure in a toga as the film showed, but rather was a well-groomed, middle-aged judge and...

No, come to think of it, maybe the movie wasn't that far off. The Judge did have a beard, although it was neatly trimmed and very dapper. And although he didn't wear a toga, in his judicial robes, I could almost imagine him throwing thunderbolts from the ancient seat of power at Mt. Olympus. And I should know about those things. After all, he was my boss.

As for me, I was just puttering around the house, enjoying a leisurely Saturday morning of a three-day weekend. The rest of the weekend was going to be busy. Our church was having a picnic out at Sunset Beach, and Jerry's crew over at Duggan's IGA had a similar event planned for Labor Day at Sooner Park. Actually, even Saturday afternoon was going to be busy. I had to take the kids and do some last minute shopping for school. They would be starting classes again right after Labor Day. As I said, a mother's work is never done, so I wouldn't be sitting around enjoying any football games this weekend.

So that really just left me the morning to relax. It would be a morning without the skirts, heels and hose I had actually become accustomed to in my short years as a woman. I could lounge around in a pair of shorts and a tank top, sandals, my hair barely combed, and no makeup while I enjoyed a cup of freshly brewed coffee. So of course, just as I settled down at the kitchen table to drink my coffee and read the paper, the doorbell rang.

My displeasure with being interrupted evaporated when I opened the door and saw Susan Jager standing there. Unlike me, she was dressed in a business skirt and blouse. Every hair was in place and her makeup was so good I would swear she had been doing it all her life. I suppose lawyers had an image to project—even on the weekends. I wouldn't have been surprised to find that the male lawyer

Susan had once been always made sure his casual attire was suitable for a round of golf at an exclusive club.

Susan carried no golf clubs though. Instead, little Joshua, her infant son, squirmed with purpose on her arm looking for his mother's breast. I had to grin. Susan had weaned him off breast milk already, but the little guy did not want to be denied. He had the same strong will that had made his mother a successful lawyer in two different lifetimes.

"Come on in," I greeted her. "Coffee's fresh."

"I could use a cup," she groaned. "I actually had to see a client this morning—with Josh here in tow."

I nodded sympathetically as I poured her a cup. Usually her husband Steven, would have watched little Josh if Susan had a Saturday meeting, but he was at the game with Jerry. Since becoming a man, Steven had become a huge football fan. Of course, in the reality that was Ovid, he had supposedly played high school football.

"I'm finally understanding what the term 'football widow' means," Susan commented once Joshua had been placed on the den floor to crawl around with his best friend, Ashley. She leaned back in her kitchen chair, only at the last minute remembering to cross her legs in a ladylike fashion. I smiled to myself. We all had little relapses like that—especially when we were stressed.

"Yeah," I agreed. "It's tough for me to even watch a game with Jerry. He doesn't think I know anything about the game."

"Of course not," Susan replied. Then, deepening her voice in a mocking imitation of Steven, she said, "Besides, you have to have played the game to really understand it."

We laughed. Of course, that was a running joke with Steven and Susan since both of them were well aware that Steven had actually been a cheerleader—a female cheerleader—in high school and not the running back he was supposed to have been.

"Men!" I commented dramatically, drawing another laugh from each of

us.

Then Susan looked at me seriously. "Would you be male again if you had the chance?" she asked quietly.

It was a question I had asked myself many times. When I had first come to Ovid and had been transformed into a woman, I would have done anything short of selling my soul to be returned to my male form. To find myself suddenly a woman with a family and all had been terrifying. The first time I had had sex with Jerry... well, let's just say I was more frightened than I had ever remembered being in my life.

But things change. I suppose in a way, many women are frightened the first time they have sex with a man. After all, men are bigger and stronger, and the idea of having a hardened part of them splitting the folds between their legs must terrify any number of women. Jerry had proven to be a gentle lover, though, taking care of my new needs in a way that had made my transition easier and more pleasant than I could imagine.

"No," I said honestly. "This is my life now. I can't imagine being without Jerry and the kids. How about you?"

Susan sighed, "I guess I have to agree with you. There were a few times when I was pregnant that I would have gladly traded back, but seeing Josh that first time made it all worthwhile."

"That's good," a voice called from the open patio door. "I'd hate to think that my best friends in Ovid weren't happy."

"Diana!" Susan and I called together, turning to face our goddess friend. Oh, as usual, Diana had an entirely new appearance, but the mischievous twinkle in her bright blue eyes was a familiar sight to us. This time, the goddess had chosen a statuesque Scandinavian appearance. Over six feet tall with pale blonde hair plaited into a long French braid, she moved with the grace of an athlete. She looked as if she belonged in the Norse pantheon instead of the Graeco-Roman one.

"Got a cup for me?" she asked, smoothly sliding into an unoccupied

chair at the kitchen table.

I wasn't surprised to see her. It had been a busy time in Ovid, and Diana saved her visits for the stories that those times generated. "I suppose you want to hear about our recent brush with the FBI," I said when we were all settled. After all, that story was the most interesting one by far in Ovid over the last few weeks.

"Of course," she replied with a smile as she took a sip of her coffee.

"Unless you know a better story..."

"Oh, I think that one will do. Do you want the story now?"

"No time like the present," she laughed as I started into my familiar trance...

I had mixed emotions when I received the call to be in my Agent-in-Charge's office in an hour. On the plus side, it got me off stakeout duty. I was only an hour into a four-hour shift, watching a rundown warehouse down by the river to see who showed up. After three days of watching and waiting in a sweltering unused warehouse office across the street, I was beginning to think the pushers who owned the crates of uncut cocaine inside the warehouse we were watching were on to us. There was a chance they'd just leave the stuff there and let us swelter for weeks watching for someone who would never come. I can say one thing for drug dealers—they know when to cut their losses.

On the minus side, no agent likes to be called into his boss's office. And the fact that I was being pulled off an assignment to see him did not bode well. I had never been the most popular agent in the Bureau with the powers that be. I presumed that whatever I was being called in for wasn't good.

"Jeez, who did you piss off?" Grady Lacroix, my partner for the stakeout shift asked.

The question should have been 'who else did I piss off?' Obviously, an agent with my pedigree wouldn't have been stuck on a stakeout in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in the summertime if he hadn't pissed off a

lot of people in his career.

“It’s probably a sign that my promotion to Assistant Director has come through,” I drawled as I picked up my suit coat and my uneaten lunch.

“In your dreams, pal,” Grady chuckled. He was a Cajun who was purely happy to be in Baton Rouge, but he knew an agent like me with a string of degrees from fine Eastern colleges could only be in Louisiana as punishment. I’d never make it beyond Special Agent in the Bureau—not in this lifetime, at least.

I supposed that was one positive thing, I thought as I drove the short distance from the river warehouse area to the Bureau’s modest offices. There was no way they could send me anyplace worse. In the four years I had been in Baton Rouge, I had had enough crawfish and Dixie Beer to last several lifetimes. Baton Rouge translates as ‘red stick,’ and it was obvious the Bureau had jammed that red stick right up my ass when they sent me to Louisiana.

And it wasn’t that my record had been all that bad. At one time, I had been on the fast track in the Bureau, so I had skills and resources that had helped get my last two bosses promoted. I had kept my nose clean and done my job, and the Bureau had rewarded me by not flushing me any further into oblivion. I knew though that one more misstep and I was toast.

So what was so important that I had been pulled off stakeout? Bruce O’Connor, the Agent-in-Charge for just the past three months, actually seemed to like me. He was a youngish Southern boy from Houston, and he seemed to think I might be able to help him get back there in a position of authority. So I really didn’t think I was being called in for an ass chewing. So what was going on?

“Mr. O’Connor is in the conference room,” the receptionist told me. I looked at her to see if she knew what this was all about, but she shrugged it off. Apparently, she didn’t know either. Not that she would have told me if she did.

Bruce had two other men seated with him. One of them I knew—he was Norman Allison, one of the Bureau’s top experts in industrial

espionage. He was pushing sixty now and the years hadn't been good to him. He was paunchier and grayer than I remembered, but the scowl on his face when he saw me meant he hadn't forgotten our earlier association. The other man was unfamiliar, though. He was tall—I could see that even from his seated position. He was in good shape despite his silver-gray hair. His well-pressed dark suit fit him well—almost like a military uniform—and made me feel just a little underdressed as I became aware of my heat-wilted suit. His stern stare made it apparent he was sizing me up.

“Baxter, sorry to pull you off stakeout,” Bruce said with a small smile which indicated he knew how much I—like all FBI agents—hated stakeout duty. He motioned to Norman Allison. “Baxter Blaine, this is...”

“I know Mr. Allison,” I said as coolly as I could manage. I didn't offer my hand and neither did he.

“And this is Admiral Nepper of Naval Intelligence,” Bruce continued unruffled.

Unlike Allison, Admiral Nepper rose to his feet and shook my hand. His grip was firm without being too firm. He looked me straight in the eye. I liked that in another man. I returned the favor. “Admiral.”

Bruce handed me a folder and motioned me to a chair. I noted all the others already had similar folders. “We've asked you here today because you may have some special insights in a case these gentlemen are working on.”

Bruce was a little uncomfortable. What was there about the case that had him concerned? I opened the file before me, spotting a photograph directly on top. When I saw the man's face in the photo, my blood ran cold.

“Andre Papiavassilou,” Admiral Nepper stated. “Also known as ‘The Greek’.”

He hadn't needed to speak. I would have recognized Andre's picture anywhere. Granted, he was older now, the nearly-black hair now

about half gray and showing signs of thinning. His face was a little wider, and there was a sagging beneath his dark eyes. The photo was a little grainy, and I could see it had been taken by a surveillance camera.

“When was this taken?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady and my hand from shaking.

“Two days ago,” the Admiral replied. “He had just arrived in Tulsa. That shot is from one of my men who was on stakeout at the airport.”

Stakeout at the airport? Then they had been waiting for The Greek.

Allison shifted uncomfortably. It was obvious to me that he didn’t want to be there. The fact that Naval Intelligence had snapped the picture told me why. Whatever The Greek was up to, Allison was the logical man to be on his tail. But he must have lost him and Naval Intelligence had picked up the scent. It had to be an embarrassment for Allison. That fact alone had made my day.

“We called you in because you know The Greek better than anyone else,” Bruce explained. The Admiral remained impassive, but Allison shot Bruce a nasty look. Bruce knew when to shut up. Besides, he had stated the obvious. I did indeed know The Greek better than anyone else. I gave him a faint nod of acknowledgement on that point.

“As you know,” the Admiral continued, “Mr. Papivassilou has been engaged in a series of industrial espionage activities since his termination from the CIA. He’s very good at his game, though, and this is the first confirmed sighting of him in nearly five years.”

I could have pointed out that a better man—me—could have tracked The Greek down. Andre must have chuckled the day he found out Allison had the primary responsibility for catching him. That meant he would be able to do whatever he wished since Allison couldn’t catch a tenth grader cheating on a history test, let alone a master spy like The Greek.

“So why is he in Tulsa?” I asked. “I would expect him to be in the

Silicon Valley or near a defense contractor.”

“So would we,” the Admiral agreed. “Look in the folder at the sheet on Vulman Industries. It’s a defense contractor headquartered in Tulsa. Vulman has made some important advances that have military applications. We think The Greek has been hired to get them.”

“For who?”

“That doesn’t really matter, does it?” the Admiral asked laconically. It was enough of a put-down to teach me to keep my mouth shut for a while.

I scanned the page he had referenced. Vulman was primarily a provider of parts for the auto industry, but the classified information on the firm indicated that they had developed some sort of fuel pump that had extended the range of our military aircraft. To the casual observer, it was mundane stuff, but to a foreign power, it was big. Imagine being able to park an aircraft carrier off the coast of a large land mass and fly to a target heretofore well beyond the normal range of an attack aircraft. Or imagine being a ruler of a Middle Eastern country and finding that your one export—oil—could now be made thirty percent more efficient, decreasing the need for your crude. One of the most important technological developments in a decade was coming out of a small company in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

I looked up at the Admiral. He now favored me with a smile. “So you understand the importance of this device.”

I nodded. “It’s incredible.”

“We believe this is what Mr. Papivassilou is after,” the Admiral concluded. “And he already has a two day start on us.”

“What do you want me to do?” I asked. I could feel blood rushing through my system as it hadn’t in years. I was being given another shot at The Greek.

“We want you to find him and stop him...” the Admiral explained, adding, “...by any means.”

I couldn’t believe what I had just heard. The Admiral had just asked

me to do what I had waited a decade to do.

I was going to get a chance to kill Andre Papivassilou. As the meeting continued, I got still more good news. I wouldn't be reporting to Allison. I'd be reporting directly to Admiral Nepper. I didn't mind being seconded to another agency. As far as I was concerned, the Bureau had done nothing but screw up every effort to catch Andre for years. Naval Intelligence couldn't do any worse.

At last, the meeting ended. Allison just grunted at me and left the office with Bruce. I understood he was now out of the picture, sent back home to Washington with his tail between his legs. I had no doubt that Admiral Nepper was the cause of it. The officer must have had powerful friends on the Hill or in the current administration. Someone with substantial power had gotten the Director of the FBI to relinquish control of this case to Naval Intelligence. It didn't happen every day.

That left the Admiral and me alone in the conference room. "Where do we begin?" I asked.

The Admiral produced a map from his pocket. "You begin here," he replied.

I looked at the circle that had been drawn on the map. It indicated a patch of what was probably farmland an hour or two out of Tulsa. I frowned. "But there's nothing there. I thought this Vulman Industries was in Tulsa."

The Admiral smiled. "You'd find the Tulsa address is nothing but a mail drop."

"Does Allison know that?" The answer wasn't important to the case. I just wanted to know how far out of the loop that idiot Allison was.

"No."

"So there's a defense plant out there—in the middle of nowhere?" I asked.

"There is a hill, overlooking a valley," the Admiral continued, ignoring my question. "You'll see what I mean. It's just a few miles past this

junction.” He pointed at the intersection of two secondary roads.

“There’s a turnoff there. Your target will be there at ten o’clock tomorrow morning to make contact with a local agent. Don’t bother to ask how I know. Just accept that I have my sources. You’ll be there to stop him.”

“Stop him?”

The Admiral smiled. “By any means possible. Don’t bother waiting for the local agent. He isn’t important. Just get your man.”

As much as I wanted to kill Andre, I was becoming a little uncomfortable with the answers the Admiral was giving me. He never once said, ‘kill him,’ but the implication was there. And he had to know my background. He had to know what killing The Greek would mean to me. I would be there alone—unusual in itself for such a mission. There would be no one around to stop me from killing him. All I would have to say was that he pulled a gun and I shot him in self-defense.

“Admiral, what is it that you aren’t telling me?” I asked at last.

“Son,” the Admiral began, although I thought I was a little old to be his son, “the mission you’re being sent on is more important than you could ever know. I can’t explain things to you now, but believe me when I tell you that you will come to understand it before long. I know we just met, but I’m going to have to ask you to trust me on this.”

I knew I would get no more from him. Of all the intelligence community, Naval Intelligence is, in my opinion, the most professional. Members of some agencies might dole out a little additional information just to show you how knowledgeable they were. Not the NI boys. And Admiral Nepper was a perfect example.

We talked for a little longer, mostly about logistic issues. He already had a chartered plane for me to take me to Tulsa where I would pick up a rental car and proceed directly to the rendezvous point. I couldn’t imagine for the world why Andre would be meeting someone in such an isolated spot, but the Admiral was so certain that he would be there that nothing more needed to be said about it.

I was actually excited for the first time in years as I hustled out of the office. I was going to be given the opportunity I had been certain was beyond my grasp—I would finally be able to end Andre’s life. I had no intention of taking the bastard alive. I had waited too long and sacrificed too much to let Andre live. I was so wrapped up in the thought that I nearly bumped into Grady on the way out.

“Grady, what are you doing here...?” I began, wondering why he was off the stakeout. My voice trailed off when I saw why. There was blood on the front of his suit. “Oh Jeez, Grady, you’re hurt!”

He shook his head wearily. “Not me, my friend. It’s Jack Kelso’s blood.”

“Jack?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Jack took the rest of your shift. About an hour ago, a couple of hard cases showed up at the warehouse. We called for backup and tried to stop them. They tried to get away. We got both of them. One’s dead and the other was taken to a hospital. But they got Jack, too.”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to ask, but I had to. “Is he...?”

“He’ll make it,” Grady assured me. “He took one in the side—large caliber—but it didn’t hit anything vital.”

We all grow up with the expression “he dodged a bullet.” I literally had. If I had continued on the stakeout, it could have been me with a bullet in me. In all my years at the Bureau, no one had ever taken a shot at me before. It was a chilling feeling to know how close I had come that day. It made me feel more vulnerable than I had felt in years. But I had to shake that off. I had a mission of my own to complete, and misgivings and second thoughts were not going to help me accomplish it.

The trip to Tulsa early the next morning was uneventful. It was a calm summer morning when I caught the Bureau’s chartered plane. Getting from Baton Rouge to Tulsa wasn’t all that easy on commercial flights, so I was happy to have the special treatment. Once in Tulsa, I picked

up a smallish Dodge sedan from the rental agency and made my way out of the urban area and into the Oklahoma countryside.

There wasn't much traffic, so I had a chance to think back on how long I had known Andre. When I had first met him back at Georgetown University, I had never dreamed then that I would be on my way to kill him in a few years...

Andre was a little older than me, and he had the apartment right across the hall from mine. I had noticed him in the building back in Georgetown. We would nod and speak to each other, but I didn't even know his name.

We formally met one day when I had locked myself out of my apartment. I was rattling the knob in frustration, wondering where I had left my key when Andre came along.

"Locked out?" he had asked in that laconic tone he often used.

I stifled the impulse to make some smart comment. Of course I was locked out. Why else would I be shaking my door in frustration? Instead though, I replied, "Yeah. Say, can I use your phone to call the super?"

The super managed three buildings in the area and could usually be reached only on his cell phone. Andre considered my request for a moment before offering, "Here, let me try."

He slipped in front of me, producing a strip of metal about the size of a credit card. To my amazement, he shoved the card into the latch plate and jiggled it a time or two. The door opened as smartly as if he had used a key.

"How did you do that?"

He shrugged. "It's not that hard. This is an old building and an old lock."

"Then anyone could break in here," I gasped.

"Not really," he replied. "The front door has a pretty good lock on it, so to break in, you'd have to have access to the building. But you should

hit the super up for a good dead bolt. That's what I have."

"In any case, I really appreciate your help," I told him as my frustration ebbed. "Can I offer you something as a reward? A beer maybe?"

He smiled. "A beer would be welcome."

So over a beer, I learned about Andre Papivassilou. He was the youngest son of a wealthy Greek family—or at least Greek by ancestry. He was a native-born American, although thanks to his parents, he also spoke fluent Greek (and six other languages I learned later). His family had made their money in the shipping industry, and his father was well known throughout Europe.

He had turned down a chance to go into the family business. His three older brothers really didn't need his help. So with his father's contacts, he had managed to get a job with a government agency after graduating with a degree in engineering from Penn State.

"So what are you doing at Georgetown?" I asked him. "This isn't much of a school for engineers."

"No," he laughed. "But it's an excellent place to get a Masters in International Affairs. My agency sent me here for a little polishing."

I hadn't asked him any more about that. He quizzed me on my studies. I told him that my twin sister and I had each graduated from the University of Virginia and had both decided on Georgetown for law school.

"Plan on setting up a partnership?" Andre had asked.

"Hardly," I replied with a grin. "Barbara and I both want to be lawyers, but we've got different careers planned. She wants to go into private practice and I plan on working here in Washington."

He smiled. "You plan to be a faceless bureaucrat?"

"I plan to be an FBI agent," I replied proudly.

For as long as I could remember, I had wanted to join the FBI. Oh, it wasn't for the glamour. I knew better than that. It was just that I had been brought up in a family where money wasn't that important. It

never is when your family has more of it than they could ever spend—and mine did. And like many wealthy Eastern families, a career in public service seemed right. Granted, the FBI was a little unusual. Most wealthy scions ended up over at State or on some Undersecretary's staff, but I wanted the Bureau.

Andre and I talked about that for a while, and he finally told me that the agency he worked for was the CIA. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Best friends that we soon became, I was more than a little pleased when Barbara became interested in Andre. She had always viewed guys her own age with disdain, preferring older, more sophisticated men. Andre was ten years older than us, so he was just about the right age for Barbara. It was a slow and deliberate courtship, and by the time Andre got his Masters, they were married. It left Barbara a year short of graduation from law school, but that was all right with her. She wanted to be with Andre far more than she wanted to be an attorney. Law school was quickly forgotten.

Life was good for all of us for the next few years. I graduated from law school and went to work for the Bureau while Andre and Barbara were assigned to the US Embassy in Bonn. We talked frequently and wrote even more. Barbara was deliriously happy with Andre and looking forward to the day when he was out of the field and they could start a family.

Then it happened.

I will never forget the day my supervisor called me into the office to give me the news. Barbara was dead. It had happened in Berlin. Those were the closing days of the Cold War. The Democratic Republic of Germany was fighting for its very existence as communism crumbled throughout Europe. It would be another year before the Berlin Wall fell, and the Soviet-sponsored German state was lashing out like a wounded animal. It caught my sister with a dying swipe.

Andre had been given an assignment in the East Germany. A high-

ranking member of the Stazi, East Germany's intelligence agency, wanted to defect. He had his ticket in hand—information on a new lens developed in the East. The lens would improve the focus of lasers, an important aspect of both the communications and the defense industry. Andre and Barbara had entered East Germany as tourists—an innocent married couple on a holiday.

The supposed defection was a trap. East German officials had set the whole thing up to capture an American agent who could be used as a bargaining chip in the shakeup they knew was sure to come when East Germany collapsed. But something went terribly wrong.

I supposed I would never know the entire truth, but I did know that Andre apparently decided it was better to escape alone than to be imprisoned with Barbara in the dying communist state. According to the official reports, he was only able to save himself. Barbara was killed in the escape attempt.

Both sides chalked it up to one more botched operation. No one got what they wanted. The East Germans lost a bargaining chip and our side lost the new lens—if it even existed at all. But I lost more than anyone else. I lost the only family I had left. Andre had traded her life for his own, and I swore to myself in my supervisor's office that day that I would make certain he paid for his cowardice.

And now the day of reckoning had come at last. A decade later, Andre would be brought to justice for the death of my sister. My life might be ruined by my actions that day, but so what? It wasn't that much of a life anyway. I had tried to make a case for punishing Andre for what had happened that day so long ago, but my pleas fell on deaf ears. It was just one of those things, everyone tried to tell me.

So I made a pest of myself, calling in every favor I could in the Washington establishment. My family had a reputation—or so I thought. But my parents were dead and I had no close friends in power. It wasn't long before I was considered a pariah—a loose cannon who was an embarrassment to one and all. I found my career in shambles as I was quietly shuffled to smaller and smaller Bureau offices far away from the centers of power.

As for Andre, he went free. With the collapse of communism, he left the CIA and became an independent agent, his talents furnished to the highest bidder. Industrial espionage had become his forte, and in a few years, he was at the top of his game. No one had even had a lead on him for several years. Until now.

I tried to imagine as I drove what it would be like to kill him. The picture Admiral Nepper had shown me showed a man who was older with a little more gray in his thinning hair and a few more wrinkles on his tanned face. But his clothing was expensive. He was prosperous—a top independent agent. It would be a pleasure to take all of that away from him. I hoped he begged for his life. It would make my revenge all the sweeter.

When I came to the spot the Admiral's map had indicated, I wondered if I was in the right place. The location was on a low hill, looking down into a valley. I had no idea what the number of the road I had taken was. The map had been hand-drawn and indicated no numbers. I checked my regular Oklahoma map and thought I had a rough idea of where I was, but there shouldn't have been the sizeable town I could see sprawled out along the floor of the valley.

I got out of the car and pulled out a pair of binoculars to look down at the town. It looked like a pleasant place, much like some of the small towns that dotted the Virginia hills near where I grew up. It was hard to make out details, as the numerous trees were in full summer foliage, hiding many of the town's details. Only church steeples and a few buildings in what appeared to be the business district rose above the level of the trees.

This had to be the town where Vulman Industries had its manufacturing facility, I realized. But it was too big to not appear on the map. Don't get me wrong. The town was only ten or perhaps fifteen thousand in population, but even a town of that size should have been prominently displayed on my map.

In other parts of the world, there are secret towns, I remembered. Chen-he, the headquarters of the South Korean Navy was missing from many early maps. In Russia and China, there were dozens of

towns that had no presence on the maps. But this was the United States. Secret towns just didn't exist—or at least they hadn't since Los Alamos during World War II.

But there was no war going on now. Surely the government had no secret project brewing that would justify keeping a town of this size secret. It had to be just a flaw in the map.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a car engine approaching the turnout where I had parked. The town was no longer important. Instead, I had to get ready for Andre. I rushed back and climbed into the car. It wouldn't do for him to recognize me.

It was exactly ten in the morning when the rented Buick pulled off and parked behind my car. That was Andre all right. He knew that he would have the advantage over his contact by being behind him. If things went wrong, he had left himself enough room to swing past my car and get away.

To lure him from the car, I had to appear ready to meet with him face-to-face. I also had to keep an eye out for the man he was supposed to meet, although the Admiral had assured me that it wouldn't be a problem. Apparently, he had gotten word to Andre that the meeting would be an hour earlier than originally scheduled. I wasn't sure how he had managed that, but I had confidence in his assurances.

So I stepped out of the car without turning to face Andre. I heard his own car open and heard the soft crunch of gravel under his feet. I was leaning down into the car seat, as if rummaging through some papers. Never once did I look up at him, depending instead upon my hearing to determine his approach. Smoothly, I turned to him, my gun in hand.

I had half expected to find Andre with a gun in his hand as well. My luck held though, for his weapon could still be clearly seen as a small bulge inside his jacket pocket. He tipped his sunglasses forward and calmly muttered, "Baxter, is it really you?"

It had been years since I had last heard that voice—since the funeral of my sister, in fact. The voice was still the mellowed, cultured baritone that I remembered. And he acted as if it was no surprise to see me

there instead of his contact. "It's me," I replied.

"And what is the gun for?" Andre asked innocently. "Surely you don't need a gun with me, old friend."

I chaffed at his amused tone. "I need the gun because we aren't friends anymore. I intend to kill you, Andre." If I had really expected him to cringe in fear and beg for his life, I would have been disappointed. He smiled a thin smile, shaking his head slowly. "Baxter, you are not a murderer."

No, I wasn't—at least not in my heart. But the thought of Andre living while my sister was in her grave was too much to bear. And this was a sanctioned kill. I had nothing to be concerned about, did I? But I found it necessary to explain the obvious. "You caused Barbara's death."

Andre's eyes dropped and he issued a soft sigh. "Do you think I would not have gladly traded places? If I could have died so that she had lived, I would have done so."

"You had that opportunity," I reminded him. "You could have protected her—let her get away. Instead, you ran and she was shot."

"You have it in the wrong order, Baxter," he corrected me. "She was shot and I ran. She was dead before she hit the ground."

"That isn't how the report reads," I reminded him.

"Not exactly," he admitted. "But that is what happened. The report was written by others who wanted to protect their own incompetence in planning the mission."

"But even if that were so, you had no business taking Barbara on that mission. She had no training."

"On that we are in agreement," Andre told me. "She volunteered, you know—insisted actually. You know how Barbara could be. There was a social function in East Berlin. We both had to attend, but I was to break off for the mission. Barbara said it would look more natural if we remained together. It would look as if we were just an innocent couple. She was right, of course, but I tried to talk her out of it. She won in the end. She always did. Your sister could not be dissuaded once her

mind was made up.”

“The report says you went in as tourists.”

“And I must once again tell you that the report was written by others,” Andre reminded me. “We left the Hungarian Embassy that night in our own car. It wasn’t difficult to make our rendezvous. It was only a short distance from the embassy. I sensed trouble at once, but Barbara had no instincts for the game. She moved suddenly, panicking the opposition. Shots were fired. Baxter, she was caught with at least three shots to the chest. Any one of them would have been fatal within minutes. You must believe me.”

I didn’t know what to believe. I only knew what I wanted to believe. I had spent over ten years hating Andre for causing the death of my sister, and I wasn’t going to stop hating him on his say so. Andre was a good actor—the best spies often are. He could have been acting when he denied responsibility for Barbara’s death, I thought. Besides, even if it didn’t happen the way I had believed, he still wasn’t blameless. He could have found another way to make the rendezvous—a way that didn’t involve my sister.

But there was a sadness in his eyes that I couldn’t dismiss. The Andre I had once known was full of life. This man was a tired, middle-aged man who looked despite his words as if he didn’t much care if I pulled the trigger or not. Perhaps I had been a little harsh in my judgment. Barbara and Andre had always been happy together, and I knew he had loved her deeply.

I couldn’t wait forever, though. I had to either shoot him or not. If I didn’t shoot him, the last decade was without meaning. I would have wasted much of my life for nothing. All the poor career moves, all the broken relationships with the women I had dated, all the intense hatred I had allowed to command my life, would be wasted.

It takes so little strength to pull a trigger, but so much willpower that it can feel as if the shooter is trying to move a boulder. I felt my trigger finger twitching, and in a strangely drawn-out moment knew that I was about to pull the trigger. In seconds Andre would be lying on the

ground in a pool of his own blood. Why couldn't I shake the feeling that by killing him, I was doing him a favor?

"Stop right there!"

Both Andre and I turned to see a policeman standing only a few yards from us, his own gun trained on me. He was locked in a serious stance, and even the mirrored sunglasses he wore couldn't block the intensity in his face. Slim and perfectly attired, from his trooper's hat down past his crisp blue-gray shirt, dark blue trousers and gleaming shoes, he looked like the model of a perfect police officer.

"Federal Officer!" I called out with as much authority as I could muster. "Stand down."

"No, you stand down," he said calmly, an authority in his voice that practically demanded obedience.

I could get off a shot, I knew. I could kill Andre on the spot. But I would pay for it with my own life. There was no way I could stop the police officer from firing at me, even if I had wanted to. I could have turned my gun on the policeman, I supposed, but I had no desire to kill an innocent officer. And in spite of the futility about my life I was beginning to feel, I had no desire to die. I gave Andre a look of regret and reluctantly put down my weapon.

"Good decision," the officer approved. "Now lay the gun on the ground."

I did so.

"Stand away. You, too, sir," he ordered with a nod to Andre. Then he added, "And remove your own weapon, too. Put it on the ground."

In a practiced move, Andre removed his gun with two fingers, placing it on the ground and backing away.

We both stood back from our guns as the officer deftly picked them up. "Into my car." He nodded at a police cruiser that just couldn't have been there a few minutes before. I had not heard the car approach. How had it gotten there?

“Both of you into the back.”

I looked over at Andre, then back at the officer. “Aren’t you going to check him for other weapons?”

“I’m now unarmed,” Andre said with a tired sigh.

“He’s now unarmed,” the officer echoed.

“But you can’t know that!” I argued angrily. “What about standard police procedure?”

“He is no longer armed.”

It was spoken in the same calm manner, but it was a pronouncement that was somehow irrefutable. I wasn’t sure how or why, but the officer knew without question that Andre was not armed. Meekly, I slid into the back seat next to Andre.

“What about our cars?” I asked when the officer had gotten in behind the wheel.

“They’ll be taken care of,” was the reply.

“Just relax,” Andre murmured to me. As a reply, I shot him a nasty glare. Andre should have been dead; I should have killed him. Why had I hesitated? The punishment I had hoped and dreamed for him for more than ten long years had been within my grasp. All I had to do was squeeze the trigger.

Why hadn’t I? I wondered as we rode silently into the town I had seen in the valley. Was it because a small part of me wanted to believe him—to believe that he hadn’t been as responsible for my sister’s death as I had imagined? Or was it the memory of our long friendship, started back at Georgetown and nurtured through the years of my youth? Or was it something else...?

Perhaps it was something else, I admitted to myself. In my years with the Bureau, I had never fired my gun in anger. That wasn’t unusual for an agent. Many agents went through their entire careers without using their guns except for practice. I had thought I could kill Andre without a second thought. I still think I would have done so if the police officer

hadn't stopped me. But I wasn't cut out to be a killer. Even Andre had remarked that I was not a murderer. I had needed to pull the trigger for closure, but I hadn't really wanted to.

Now the chance was over, I realized as I saw the large, freshly painted billboard that welcomed us to Ovid, Oklahoma. Ovid? I had never heard of a town by that name. Granted, I wasn't terribly familiar with Oklahoma, but I had driven through much of the eastern part of the state before. I knew the names of dozens of Oklahoma towns, but not Ovid.

It looked to be a town of some size. It looked much like other farm towns I had seen in that part of the country. Numerous small businesses crowded shoulder to shoulder along the four-lane boulevard that the highway became. Tall, stately oak trees lined the sidewalks and neatly trimmed houses could be seen up the side streets.

The only thing that appeared a little odd was that everything looked a little too neat and clean. Lawns were uniformly trim, buildings were freshly painted, and the roads even lacked potholes and cracks. It was like a small town as envisioned by Norman Rockwell or John Falter from one of their old *Saturday Evening Post* covers.

Andre noticed it, too. I could tell because he was turning his head with interest at each new sight. He kept it to himself, though, and it was just as well. I had no interest in talking with him. I might not be able to kill him as I had planned, but I wasn't ready for rapprochement.

It was just as we turned off the highway following a white and green sign labelled 'Business District' that I noticed my first ghost. At least that's what I thought when I saw her. There were three young girls, early teens in age, walking down the street together. They were laughing and giggling, their towels and small bags evidence that they were on their way for a swim. Each of them had the same fresh-scrubbed youthful look, and each had a ponytail of varying blonde hair. But one of them was different—very different. Her hair was no less blonde and her smile no less alluring, but I could see through her!

No, that's not quite right. I couldn't exactly see through her, but I sensed that I could tell what should have been hidden by her body. It was as if the grassy lawn behind her could be seen right through her. I know the explanation isn't clear, but it was something that had to be experienced before it could be truly understood.

"Look!" I called to Andre. I didn't really want to speak with him, but I needed confirmation of what I had seen.

Andre turned. "What is it?"

"Look at those three," I pointed at the girls as the car slid slowly past them. "Tell me what you see."

He turned to watch them recede from our vision. He shrugged. "I see three young girls. What was I supposed to see?"

"Did one of them look... odd?"

"No."

It was my turn to shrug. What was I to do? Tell him I had just seen a ghost? I slumped back into the car seat and Andre did the same.

Something just didn't feel right, I told myself as we pulled up in front of a stately if somewhat modest building which declared itself to be 'City Hall' in chiselled granite above the entrance. First of all, this town of Ovid shouldn't even be there, I reasoned. If it had been, I would have heard of it—or at least it would have been on the map. And then there were the 'ghosts.' What the hell were they anyway? I had to call my office and get someone working on this.

I still had my cell phone, so I speed dialled the office. But as I got out of the car, my phone pressed to my ear, I heard nothing in the receiver. I speed dialled again. Still nothing.

"Your phone won't work here," the officer—I now saw from his nametag that his name was Mercer—said.

"It's tied to a satellite," I explained. "It doesn't need a cell."

"But it won't work here," he argued. And he was right. That was strange. It should have worked anywhere. It utilized the most up-to-

date technology we had. I looked at Officer Mercer questioningly. "You'll understand soon enough."

I took him at his word. There seemed to be nothing else I could do. I followed him into the building, just ahead of Andre. We'd get Andre booked and then we could argue about jurisdiction and I could call Baton Rouge.

We were escorted into a courtroom. The room was almost empty except for an attractive blonde sitting alone in the visitor's gallery and another woman—a brunette—seated at the front of the courtroom. I presumed it was to hold a quick arraignment for Andre, so I followed without question. I was more than a little surprised when I was led to the desk at the front of the courtroom where the attractive brunette in a lemon-colored women's suit stood to greet us.

"Thank you, Officer Mercer," she said, and the officer nodded and stepped away. Then she turned to Andre and me. "I'm Susan Jager. I'll be the attorney for both of you today..."

"Wait a minute," I said with a smile, holding up my hand. "I think you're a little confused. I'm not on the docket today. Mr. Papiavassilou here is my prisoner and I assume we're here for his arraignment."

She smiled back at me. "No, Mr. Blaine, I'm afraid it's you who are confused. You and Mr. Papiavassilou here are both charged with loitering and..."

"Loitering!" I shouted. "What in God's name are you talking about, woman? I'm an FBI agent and this man is my prisoner. And since when have loitering charges been lodged against individuals under these circumstances?"

Andre was practically laughing. I was sure he had no more idea what was going on than I did, but my discomfort was obviously giving him cause for amusement.

"Mr. Blaine, I suspect you have noticed things aren't always what they seem in Ovid."

She said that to me as she looked directly into my eyes. I almost shot

off my mouth again, but I stopped as her eyes drilled into mine. As I got control of my anger, I realized what she was talking about. I had been stopped from killing Andre by a police officer who shouldn't have been able to sneak up on us so quickly and quietly. I had seen people who were nearly transparent. I was being tried for loitering of all things in a town that shouldn't exist. And come to think of it, I had never heard Officer Mercer call in my name, so how did this pretty young attorney know it?

"Loitering is a serious charge in Ovid," she went on once she had seen I was willing to listen. And by listening, I knew she wasn't really telling me how serious a charge loitering was. Instead, she was telling me I was in deep shit whether I knew it or not. I was beginning to understand how Alice must have felt just before meeting the Red Queen.

"Excuse me," Andre interrupted, shaking his head. "This man was just about to kill me in cold blood and he is going to be brought up on a charge of loitering?"

The Jager woman sighed. "I don't think you were listening either. You are both being brought up on loitering charges. Now listen to what I have to tell you because the Judge will be out here in a few moments. If either of you are frivolous or disrespectful, he'll throw the book at you. And you must believe me when I tell you that it can be a very thick and heavy book."

I chuckled, "You make this judge of yours sound larger than life. What's the worst he can do—double our fine to a hundred dollars each and court costs? This is some sort of a scam, isn't it? Maybe you didn't hear me before, Ms. Jager. I'm a Federal agent, and if this turns out to be some sort of elaborate con, you and your judge and that police officer over there are in a lot of trouble."

Her eyes were locked on mine. "Suit yourself, Mr. Blaine. But let me tell you that when the door to the Judge's chambers opens, you may want to change your attitude. I'll do whatever I can for you, but in the final analysis, you will determine your own fate."

I snorted and sat down. Andre sat as well. We didn't get to sit long, though. Before Ms. Jager could come up with another retort, Officer Mercer called out, "All rise! Municipal Court of Ovid, Oklahoma, is now in session, the honorable Judge presiding."

I stood more from habit than respect. From my attorney's description, I might have expected a judge right out of the Old Testament. Instead, he looked fairly ordinary as judges go—perhaps a bit more distinguished than the norm for a small-town municipal judge, but that was about all. He was not terribly tall—six feet or maybe a little less. He had a neatly-trimmed beard, mostly dark brown in color but with a trace of gray. His hair was of a similar color. He wore gold-rimmed glasses which gave him a studious look.

Then I noticed his eyes.

His eyes were blue, the color of icy waters. When he stared at me, I felt almost as if I was already being judged. Given what was about to happen, that was probably the case. Perhaps Ms. Jager was right, I thought. It would not be wise to annoy this man.

"Be seated," he called out as he took his seat at the bench. His voice was deep and authoritative. We all sat quickly. But had he told us to run around the room three times, I think we would have done so without thinking. Such was the power in that voice.

"Officer Mercer, what is our first case this morning?" In reply, Officer Mercer laid a folder in front of the Judge. And yes, I meant the capital letters. The Judge was entitled to them as I was soon to find out. I found myself wondering when Officer Mercer had found the time to make up a folder on us. He hadn't been out of my sight from the moment I had first seen him.

"Since the charge is the same for both of you," the Judge said, "we might as well try both of you together."

"Your Honor!" Andre jumped up to my surprise as well as to the surprise of our attorney. "I must protest! I am being tried on a minor charge while this man..." He pointed at me. "...attempted to kill me."

I wasn't about to let him get away with that. I was suddenly on my feet as well. "Your Honor! This man is wanted by the Federal Government for espionage. I ask that I be allowed to contact my superiors at once and have him taken into Federal custody."

To my surprise and dismay, the Judge seemed more amused by our ranting than deliberate. "Such odd behavior," he commented, "for two men who used to be such good friends."

Now how had he known that?

"And what would you have accomplished had you killed him, Mr. Blaine?"

"I..." I suddenly realized I had no answer for the question. The thought of killing Andre had long since taken on a life of its own. I had imagined killing him in a variety of ways in a number of settings, but I really had given little thought to what I would accomplish by the act. Would it have brought Barbara back? Of course not. Would it have enhanced my career? Probably not, even if I had shot Andre clearly in the line of duty. Yet he deserved to die, I reminded myself. He was a coward who had cost my sister her life.

"Killing seldom accomplishes what the killer had hoped," the Judge said rather softly. "As a law enforcement officer, you should have known that, Mr. Blaine. There is a price to be paid now—and you will pay it."

I found for some reason that any verbal response I might have had died on my lips. But I remained standing, almost as if I had forgotten how to sit.

He turned to Andre. "And you, Mr. Papivassilou, don't think that we are unaware of your purpose in coming here. You have hired yourself out to the highest bidder, no matter what the consequences of your actions. Well, today your actions have created consequences which will fall upon you."

"Your Honor, perhaps we should..." our attorney began, but I would never know what she was about to suggest. The Judge silenced her

with a subtle motion of his hand. "Ms. Jager, I have wasted your time by asking you to defend these two men today. Their conduct is indefensible."

I nearly spoke up, but something told me to keep my mouth shut. The Judge had an angry scowl on his face, and it might be better to accept judgment and move on, I thought. Of course, if I had known what justice in Ovid meant, I might not have been as passive.

"I find you both guilty," the Judge intoned. "And it is my duty to exact upon the two of you the harshest penalty I can." Part of my mind was asking what was so harsh that it lay within the prerogative of a city magistrate? After all, the charge was only loitering, as trumped-up a charge as that might be. What was the worst he could do? A stiff fine? A couple of days in jail? But as much as the rational part of my mind tried to assure me that his was a minor incident, some feral part of my brain was insisting that Andre and I were about to experience something beyond our understanding.

The Judge began to speak, but the words were not familiar to me. It sounded a little like Latin, but the accent reminded me more of modern Italian. This was not the Latin I remembered from listening to priests or hearing in a classroom. This was Latin, I realized suddenly, as it must have once been spoken in the Forum of Rome when the Roman Empire ruled much of the civilized world. It was melodious and vibrant.

I didn't have much time to think about the words he was uttering, though. I was too busy watching Andre. He appeared to be changing, almost as if the outlines of his body were blurring. The middle-aged sag that his facial muscles had experienced was suddenly gone, and his face became lean and handsome and younger. He appeared to have grown several inches, so he was now taller than I. His thinning, graying hair was suddenly fuller and dark blonde in color, trimmed in a conservative cut. His clothes changed as well, becoming crisper although still casual, and I could see the muscles rippling and expanding on his arms.

There was something on his white polo shirt that I couldn't quite make

out. Then I was able to see the embroidered shape of a gold eagle on the pocket. Underneath, I could see the words 'Ovid High School Track Team.' The expression on Andre's face changed suddenly from one of panic and confusion to one of strength and confidence.

It wasn't until the changes appeared to be complete that I began to realize my own body was changing as well and had been as Andre changed. I suddenly realized that Andre hadn't gotten much taller. Instead, I had become shorter. And my body felt... different. It felt smaller, weaker, more... more...

...feminine.

I probably would have known right away that I was now female even if I hadn't found myself in heels, nylons and a dress, but my suddenly feminine attire was like the exclamation mark at the end of a sentence. I could feel my heels slightly elevated and the extra pressure that put on my toes. I could feel the air moving over my legs and the strange sensation of sheer nylon against smooth legs. The skirt of my dress was so light it almost felt as if I was wearing nothing at all below my waist, and I felt suddenly exposed and vulnerable.

"So I'll suspend the fine this time, Mrs. Cameron," I heard the Judge speaking in an almost friendly Oklahoma drawl. "Try to drive a little more carefully next time."

I jumped at the sound of his gavel, feeling the spring of hair around my ears and on the back of my neck. Then I felt an arm slip around my waist. I was too stunned to do anything about it. A male voice whispered in my ear, "You see, Julie, there was nothing to worry about."

The Judge had left the bench. I honestly didn't see him leave, but in any event, he was gone. So for that matter was Officer Mercer. I looked around, panicked. The blonde in the visitor's gallery was just walking out of the courtroom, and my attorney was stuffing papers in her briefcase as she watched me out of the corner of her eye. I couldn't help but think there was a little smile on her lips.

I slowly got away from the man's arm and faced him. It was Andre—or

perhaps I should say it was the man I had watched Andre turn into. There was no panic on his face as there had to have been on mine. He looked calm and collected, and his eyes were looking at me in a way that could only be described as intimate. I felt my new face flushing. Whatever had just happened was not what he thought had happened. To him, everything was obviously very normal.

Then a thought struck me. The attorney knew. Susan Jager was obviously part of what was going on. I had to talk to her—alone—before she left me with this man who had been Andre.

“Uh...” I began, hearing for the first time the sweet, feminine voice that was now mine, “would you excuse me for a minute? I need to talk to... Susan.”

“Sure!” he replied brightly. “I’ll just go use the restroom. Then I’ll take you to lunch to celebrate your brilliant victory in court and get you back to work before Cassie gets upset with you.”

He might as well have been speaking in the strange foreign language the Judge had used for all the sense it made to me. Victory? Lunch? Cassie? What was going on?

As he left, Susan Jager looked up at me. The smile was still on her face, but it was a smile of amusement. Her eyes spoke of sympathy for what I was going through.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You’re a girl,” she replied. Well, ask a stupid question...

“I know that, but why?” I asked through gritted teeth. “How? What do I need to do to change back?”

“I don’t know that he’ll be in the restroom long enough to answer all of those questions,” she replied, “but I’ll do my best. The why is because the Judge decided you should be a girl. Don’t feel too bad. My guess is that three quarters of the men who face him end up as girls.”

“There are others he’s done this to?” I wanted to know.

“Look, if you ask more questions, I’m never going to be able to answer

your first batch.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “Just tell me how I get changed back.”

“You don’t.”

Now I knew how a bug felt when it hits a windshield. “What do you mean I don’t? I can’t be this. I’m not a girl.”

If I had been expecting sympathy, I would have been very, very disappointed. “You most certainly are a girl,” she said firmly. “And you’ll be one for the rest of your life. Look in your purse.” She nodded at a black leather purse that was resting in the seat I had recently occupied. “That will tell you who you are.”

With shaking hands, I picked up the purse. The feel of the leather on my smaller fingertips somehow made my new existence more real. I had a purse. Only women carry purses. Therefore...

“Here, let me help,” she said, a little more sympathetically as she saw me fumbling through the unfamiliar bag with my lengthened fingernails getting in the way. She pulled a large wallet out of the purse. Opening it, she told me, “Your name is Julie Cameron.”

Come to think of it, I knew that. The Judge had called me Mrs. Cameron and the man who had been Andre had called me Julie.

“You’re twenty-six years old,” she continued. “Judging from the wedding picture in here the man with you is your husband.”

“My what?” I screeched.

“Look, don’t freak out,” she advised with a soft touch of her hand on mine. “Remember, this is forever. You have no choice. Play along until you get used to it.”

That was easy for her to say. She had obviously been female her entire life. I wondered what she would think if she suddenly found herself turned into a man with a curvy blonde for a wife. I was on the verge of telling her that when the former Andre sauntered back into the room.

“You ready to go, Julie?” he called. “If we’re both going to have time

for lunch, we need to get going.”

Before I had time to protest, he wrapped his arm around my small waist and gently ushered me to the door. I had only a moment for a backward glance at Susan Jager who was following my dilemma with a hint of a smile.

Play along, she had said. I supposed I had no choice for the moment. Andre was certainly doing a good job of that. He was acting as if there was nothing wrong in the world. I was beginning to feel as if I had been surrounded by madmen, and there was nothing to do about it but play along.

Playing along wasn't the easiest thing in the world to do. My body had changed so radically that every move I made seemed to bring new, strange sensations. There was the movement of fairly long hair along my shoulders and the back of my neck. Then there was the feel of breasts bobbing up and down. Sure, they were secured in a bra, but that didn't stop them from moving completely. As for the feel of a skirt and nylons, I nearly blushed from embarrassment. First, I was blushing because it was embarrassing to be wearing something so feminine, but I was also disturbed to find the feel of them against my new skin was actually fairly pleasant.

But the strangest part of those first few minutes was when we reached the hallway and I realized from the clicking sound from my shoes that I was wearing heels! I had noticed them when I was first transformed, but I had forgotten I was standing on them when Andre guided me out of the room. Oh, they weren't terribly high, I noted as I looked down at them—no more than a couple of inches. I had probably worn some nearly as high while horseback riding since cowboy boots have a noticeable heel. But these heels were different. They were tiny little things, supporting a few straps of dark blue leather which matched the color of my skirt. And I was walking in them as if I had been wearing heels forever.

“How about *The Greenhouse*?” my ‘husband’ asked. Since I had no idea what *The Greenhouse* even was, I could only nod my head.

“Great!”

The Greenhouse turned out to be a small town version of the quiche, wine and salad restaurants that are found in all cities. I remembered a number of similar places in Washington, and even Baton Rouge had its share of them. This one was a little different, though, in that it wasn't at all pretentious. The wait staff seemed genuinely friendly, and patrons greeted each other with a friendly nod. To my surprise, even my escort and I were greeted with a number of calls of “Hi, Jeff. Hi, Julie.”

Jeff. So that was Andre's name now. I would have to remember that until we were alone. I nodded and smiled, returning a light “Hi” in my new voice. Of course, I had no idea who any of the other patrons were. To my surprise, though, ‘Jeff’ greeted them by name.

“Hi, Charles, Rachel,” he brightly greeted an attractive older couple. When I say older, I mean they were probably about my age—or at least the age I had been. Since according to my driver's license, I was now all of twenty-six, a couple in their forties was now older to me. It was strange how my mind accepted that idea.

“Hi, Jeff, Julie,” the two of them returned brightly. Then the woman—an attractive blonde who looked ten years younger than I suspected she was—looked more closely at us. She seemed to be detecting something different about us, but her companion was oblivious, chatting amicably with ‘Jeff.’

The hostess had our table ready, so we said our goodbyes to Charles and Rachel and followed her to a corner table.

‘Jeff’ chatted about one thing and then another once we had ordered. In the relative seclusion of the corner, I tried to broach the subject of what we were going to do to get changed back, but he seemed oblivious to any such thoughts. Slowly as we sat there, I began to realize that while I remembered my previous life very clearly, Jeff had no idea that he had ever been anyone else.

I found that to be disturbing for many reasons. First, as much as I detested Andre, I had lost a potential ally in any effort to get changed

back. If Andre remembered only being Jeff, there would be no hope in enlisting his help to get changed back. I was also upset at the thought that such power existed. The Judge had effectively destroyed a person, replacing him with another as simply as most people would change socks. And finally, I came to the horrible realization that if Jeff remembered only this life, then I would be expected to be his wife in every way—including sex. There was just no way I could have sex with a man—period.

I did manage to learn a fair amount about our new lives just chatting with Jeff over a chef's salad. I learned that I was a librarian on a small college campus—someplace called Capta College. I had never heard of it, but I supposed there were a lot of small colleges I had never heard of.

Jeff was the Track and Field coach at Ovid High School where he also taught Political Science and a couple of other civics classes. And he was teaching some summer classes, although it appeared his hours were more flexible than mine. As we talked—with him doing most of the talking—I came more and more to the realization that he remembered nothing but his new life here.

I tried my best to do as Susan had suggested and just play along. I tried as best I could to be the sweet, loving wife. That didn't mean I simpered and giggled, but when he put his hand on mine at one point in the conversation, I didn't give in to my first impulse and pull it away. I smiled at his jokes, demurely thanked him for his complements, and generally tried to keep a little on the reserved side, but not to the point of causing him to suspect something was wrong.

Maybe when I figured out how I was going to get my real body back, I'd leave Andre as Jeff. After all, it was a fitting punishment. In a way, Andre was just as dead as he would have been if I hadn't hesitated. I could quietly get the Judge to change me back and steal away, leaving Jeff confused and alone.

But all that lay in the future. For now, I reminded myself, I had to play the role of Julie Cameron, wife and librarian. I just hoped I wouldn't have to play mother, too. Did Jeff and Julie have children? Oh God, I

hoped not. It would be hard enough to figure out a way to escape without having a little rug rat trailing after me every free minute.

But as our lunch progressed, I began to realize that Ovid might present me with an unexpected assignment as well. As I watched the patrons eating, I could see that several of them—the majority in fact—were nearly transparent. I remembered reading once about a village in the old USSR where agents were trained in a setting resembling a small American town. Maybe that was what Ovid was, only maybe the nearly transparent people were some sort of alien race, bent on infiltrating our world. If so, it was my duty to learn whatever I could about the town and report back to my superiors.

But who would believe me? My name wasn't Fox Mulder—or I suppose more appropriately now Dana Scully. What was I going to tell them anyway—that I had been arrested for loitering in a town that shouldn't even be here, turned into a woman, and watched as the man I was assigned to follow was turned into my husband? After telling that story to my superiors, they'd send me someplace that made Baton Rouge look like New York City. No, come to think of it, they wouldn't. After all, they wouldn't even recognize me as Baxter Blaine. They'd just drop me off at the nearest loony bin.

Jeff looked at his watch. "Well, I suppose I'd better be getting you back to work."

I was relieved. I knew I hadn't exactly been holding up my end of the luncheon conversation, but how could I? I had no idea who I was now beyond my name. I didn't even know what I looked like.

What did I look like anyway? Was I attractive? I know that was a completely feminine thought, but if I had to be stuck as a woman, I might as well be an attractive one. The wedding picture in my wallet was so small it was hard to tell. Come to think of it, just about everyone I had seen in Ovid was reasonably attractive. It was sort of like when you see a small town portrayed on a TV show. The residents always seem a little more attractive and a little better dressed than you might expect.

“Just a minute,” I told him on a sudden whim. “I want to go to the restroom.” Almost without thinking about it, I grabbed my purse and walked back to the restroom. I fully intended to spend a few private moments familiarizing myself with my new appearance and checking out the contents of my purse.

I was disappointed to find I wasn’t alone in the restroom. In front of the mirror, the older blonde Jeff had called Rachel was applying lipstick to her full lips. She saw me, put the lipstick back in her purse, and smiled. “Hi.”

“Hi,” I returned. Now I’d have to go into a stall to get some privacy. As for seeing myself, I’d have to settle for just a glance in the mirror. Should I do something about my lipstick, too? I knew I was wearing it; I could taste it. What was I supposed to do?

“Don’t mind me,” she said. “Go ahead and take a good look at yourself. Everybody does.”

“Ev... everybody?” I stammered.

“A lot of us used to be somebody else,” she laughed. “The changes all happen so quickly and we’re thrust into our new lives so fast that suddenly we realize we’ve been walking around for hours in our new roles and haven’t even seen what we look like.”

“You mean... I... Andre...?”

She laughed, “Well, I don’t know about this Andre. I assume that’s our new Jeff?”

I nodded stupidly.

“Yes. Most of the real people here used to be someone else—including me. I suppose you’ve noticed the transparent people?”

I nodded again. I was beginning to feel like one of those stupid dolls with the bobbing heads.

“They’re called shades. Nobody knows for sure what they really are. But just treat them like people. They’re as solid as you are and seem to think they’re really people. Maybe they are.”

I was listening to her, but I had also caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. At first, it was if I was looking at the image of another person, but as I realized the young woman in the mirror matched my movement precisely, I began to come to terms with who I had become. She—I—was attractive. Not beautiful, mind you, but attractive. My hair was still brown, but it was a shinier brown with highlights of red and even gold that gave it character. Maybe it was the length that emphasized its variety. My hair was shoulder length with just a bit of a curl to it.

The hair framed a face that was cute. There was no other word for it, really. My skin was fair, dusted with just a hint of freckles showing through the expertly-applied makeup. My eyes were blue as they had been when I was male, but they seemed somewhat deeper and more alluring, framed as they were by long lashes and separated by a small, almost delicate nose.

There were earrings on my ears. I hadn't noticed the small gold hoops before, thinking it was just my hair brushing against my ears. My navy blue dress was short-sleeved and cut in a way to make the top look almost like a double-breasted jacket. Funny that I should mention double breasted. My dress wasn't the only thing in the mirror that was. I had two prominent—but not overly large—breasts now.

"You're very attractive," Rachel told me.

Yes I was. I even looked just a bit like my old male self. More disturbingly, I looked just a little like my sister as well. The thought nearly brought a tear to my eye.

Rachel misunderstood my look of consternation. She placed her hands gently on my arms and said, "Don't worry, dear. It isn't all that bad. I know you're new here and..."

"How do you know I'm new here?" I demanded, turning to face her. I was slightly shorter than she was, but I had no trouble staring her directly in the face.

She smiled, unruffled. "Well, any of us who remember who we were before would have noticed how uncomfortable you are with yourself.

You were squirming about at your table as if your panties were riding up uncomfortably...”

I had to nod. She was absolutely right. The panties felt as if they should have cut right through my crotch, but there was nothing there for them to cut. It’s funny, but I had never been terribly aware of my dick and balls being there as a man, but as a woman, I was acutely aware of their absence.

“And I noticed you didn’t recognize me when you came in. I’ve known Jeff and Julie Cameron ever since I came to Ovid, so there’s that. And the most obvious reason is that neither of you are shades.”

“You mean Julie Cameron was one of those transparent people?”

“And Jeff,” she confirmed. “That’s often the way it is. The shades are placeholders until the Judge transforms someone into that life.”

“But why?” I pressed. She laughed, “That’s the big question. No one seems to know—or if they do, they aren’t telling.” She reached in her purse and pulled out a card and a pen. She deftly wrote something on the back of the card in neat, feminine style and handed it to me. “We need to get back out there or our husbands will think we’ve fallen in. I’ve written my home number there. Call me once you’ve gotten settled in. I’ll do what I can to help you.”

She started out the door, then turned. “And by the way, I’m having a coffee at my house Saturday. Since Charles and Jeff usually play golf then, you should join us. It will give you a chance to meet some of the other women—although I should warn you, many of them are like your Jeff and have no idea they were ever anyone else. And they will all think they already know you. So you need to act the part you’ve been given and you’ll do fine. Just go with the flow.”

She left me there with the card in my hand wondering just how many others there were in Ovid like me and how many were like Andre—or Jeff as I had to think of him now.

Jeff was waiting patiently for me when I got back to the table. If I had taken too long, he didn’t comment. I suppose husbands get

themselves in trouble for complaining about how long their wives are in the restroom.

We walked back to the city building where Jeff had parked. Once in the car, Jeff seemed to know just where he was going. I looked around, trying to memorize landmarks and street names so I could get around on my own. It was difficult to do, though, because I found myself watching the people on the streets as well. The majority were shades, it seemed, but there were a fair number of real people as well. Each of them must have met the Judge at one time or another, I thought to myself. Yet none of them appeared alarmed at their existence. I wondered how many of them were like me or Rachel and remembered a previous life. Very few, I suspected, or they would have stormed the courtroom and demanded to have their real lives back. Even the Judge couldn't have stood his ground against a determined mob, I imagined.

Soon—for it was a small town—we were driving through a college campus. It was an attractive place, not unlike many of the small liberal arts colleges I had seen back East. The buildings were for the most part old and stately if smaller than the ones I was used to. A few students probably taking a light summer load of classes strolled contentedly along the tree-lined walkways. I heard a bell ringing ponderously from a stone clock tower.

“We just made it,” Jeff said proudly, coming to a stop in front of a building larger than most. It was an older building, dating back I would have to guess to the twenties, with columns on either side of the doors and high arched windows along the front of the building. Cut above the columns, the words *Homer Memorial Library* could be seen. Compared to college libraries I was familiar with, it was fairly small, but this Capta College didn't look to have a very large student body.

As I hustled to get out of the car, Jeff leaned over, and before I realized what he was doing, he planted a warm kiss on my lips. It's a good thing he closed his eyes, or he would have noticed that mine were as wide as dinner plates. As quickly as I could recover, I broke off the kiss. When he opened his eyes in disappointment, I managed a

weak smile. “Now I’m late.”

He grinned. “I’ll pick you up at five.”

Oh joy, I thought. Something to look forward to. I’d be going home with a man who was now my husband but who used to be my worst enemy—and before that he had been my brother-in-law and my best friend. I had to find a way out of Ovid as quickly as possible.

But that wasn’t going to be easy, I thought grimly. I was stuck as a young woman—a librarian apparently with a husband and no car. Why didn’t the Judge just lock me in jail and throw away the key? Until I could find a way to get my real life back and get out of Ovid, I’d have to take the advice I had been given. Go with the flow, I thought as I slowly walked up the steps to the library, being extra cautious in my heels. Going with the flow was what Rachel had said. And Susan had advised me to act the part I had been given, I recalled as I pushed open the large oak and glass door.

I gasped a little when I stepped in the library. It was rather old fashioned in design, but the workmanship would have put some of the well-known public buildings in Washington to shame. Parquet flooring, polished to a high shine was evident, and the checkout counter looked to be made of hand-shaped mahogany. Marble trim was on the walls, and the paintings hung all about looked as if they should be in the National Gallery. Oh, there were computers on the checkout counter, and modern lighting gave the entire room a warm but efficient look. But take away those features and the room might have been in an important public building at the turn of the last century.

“Oh, there you are, Julie!” a bright, feminine voice called out to me. I turned to see a petite blonde woman, about the age I now was. She was dressed in a knee length shirt dress of a soft yellow which complemented her hair perfectly. She was also one of the prettiest girls I had ever seen. I longed to be male again just so I could ask her on the spot to be my wife. She smiled at me. “Mom was looking for you a few minutes ago. I covered for you and told her you were in the ladies room.”

Okay, I was willing to act the part, go with the flow, and all of that nonsense, but before I played the game, it would have been helpful to know the rules. For example, who was this little slip of a girl and why should I care if her mother was looking for me or not? Before I could think of a way to find out that information, a voice barked out at me, “Oh, there you are, Julie. We have a new shipment in and I need you to catalogue and shelve them this afternoon.”

The woman hadn’t even waited until I turned to face her to give me my marching orders, but there was no doubt that this woman was my boss. She was a little severe in appearance, but not unattractive. She wore a conservative but feminine white blouse and a gray below-the-knee skirt. I estimated her age to be near fifty, but her skin was unwrinkled and her brown hair had only a hint of gray. Of course, it was hard to tell with the hair since it was tied into a tight bun. She wore sensible shoes—black loafers with almost no trace of a heel. In short, she looked strictly business.

“Where’s your nametag?” she asked brusquely. I looked at where her nametag should be and it was there: Minnie Musgrave it read with Librarian written in smaller letters under it.

Before I could think of an answer, the blonde covered for me. “Oh, Mother, you know she was in court this morning. You don’t expect her to wear her nametag in court, do you?”

The older woman grunted in response. “You’d better get going on those books, Julie. There’s quite a few of them.”

With that, she left me standing there. The blonde giggled, then looked around to make sure no one was nearby. She took my hand. “Come on, I’ll help you. You’ll get used to Mother after a while.”

Oh wonderful. That meant this little blonde—Callie Musgrave, her nametag said—knew all about me, too. Did everyone except the man who was supposed to be my husband know I had just been transformed into Julie Cameron?

She led me to a well-lit office where several boxes of books were stacked next to a desk. “Let’s get started,” she said.

“Wait a minute. I suppose you used to be somebody else, too. Is that right?” I asked.

There was that sweet smile again. “Not exactly. But I know you used to be someone else. An FBI agent, wasn’t it? How exciting. I’ve read so much on that organization. It’s a shame about what happened to you, though.”

“Wait a minute. What do you mean by that? And why do you know so much about me?”

“I’ll tell you what,” she offered, using a letter opener to break the tape on the top box. “As soon as we’ve catalogued all these books Mother told you to do, I’ll answer some questions for you.”

“The questions I just asked?”

She looked so demure. “Maybe. Maybe some other questions will pop up. Now, shall we do these books?”

I sighed. “Okay. Here, let me lift this box on the desk.”

She seemed amused by my offer. I put my arms around the box. It was a lot wider than I realized, I thought. Then I remembered that my arms weren’t as long as they had been. Then came the next surprise. I tried to lift the box and it didn’t even budge.

Callie actually giggled. “Heavy, isn’t it?”

“You want to give me a hand?”

“Only a man would try to move the whole box,” she laughed. “We’ll just take a few out at a time. I’m not going to strain myself trying to lift that.”

I straightened up. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“You’re funny,” she snickered.

I wasn’t trying to be funny, but I didn’t tell her that. She would probably have rolled on the floor laughing if I had. I gave another sigh and pulled out a couple of the books. So at least now I knew what the expression ‘weak as a girl’ really meant. I didn’t feel weak, and as a

girl, I was probably in pretty decent shape. But this body simply was not designed for lifting heavy objects.

With Callie's help, cataloguing the books was an easy task. The page in each book containing publishing information told us exactly what the classification of each book was. Or at least that was true on the newer books. A couple of the boxes contained very old books—some nearly a hundred years old. Fortunately most of those were put in a separate pile. "Mother goes through those herself," Callie explained.

Once we had entered them into the system, the computer spit out neat labels to be attached to the spine of each book. We must have catalogued over a hundred books, I realized, and that didn't include another twenty or so we had set aside for Millie Musgrave.

Looking at Callie, it was hard to believe she was Millie Musgrave's daughter. I suppose there was some family resemblance when I really thought about it. I'm sure Millie was more attractive when she was younger, but Callie just didn't seem imposing enough to be her daughter. And where Millie was all business, her daughter chatted as we worked, telling me several valuable facts about Ovid.

As an agent—or I suppose I had to consider myself a former agent by now—I knew that often the best way to get valuable information was to just shut up and listen. As long as the other person wanted to talk, you couldn't help but learn something. I learned Ovid was a small but prosperous town of a little less than fifteen thousand. It had a thriving local economy, consisting of a solid base in agriculture as well as a small but growing high tech manufacturing firm that held some important government contracts as well as providing parts for the auto industry. That, of course, was Vulman Industries.

Callie spoke of a number of people, but no one I was familiar with. It was obvious to me though that Callie and her mother represented yet another caste in Ovid. There were shades and there were transformees like me and Jeff. I suppose a case could be made that even Jeff and I were of different castes since I remembered my real life and he didn't. But Callie and her mother were something else. They seemed to know things the rest of us in Ovid didn't. The Judge

and his henchman, Officer Mercer, were certainly of that caste. Maybe Susan Jager was one of them as well; I wasn't certain. And maybe—just maybe—I could learn enough from Callie to figure a way back to my real life and out of Ovid.

At last I broke in, “Callie, you seem to know about just about everyone here in Ovid. What can you tell me about the Judge?”

She smiled enigmatically. “I suppose I could tell you quite a bit—if I wanted to.”

“So tell me.”

“I don't want to,” she laughed. “Besides, Father doesn't like it when I tell too much about him. He says it spoils everything when I do.”

“Father?”

She put her hand in front of her mouth and looked suddenly sheepish. “Oops! I really didn't mean to tell you that.”

“So it's Judge Musgrave?” I pressed.

“Oh Julie, you're so funny!” she chortled. “No, Mother and Father aren't married. They never have been. Father... well, let's just say that when he was younger, he was something of a rake. And Mother wasn't quite as prudish either.”

I tried to imagine the stern, distinguished figure who had looked down at me from the bench as a rake. The image didn't fit. But Callie looked to be about my age, so presumably he had sired her a number of years ago. Of course I had no idea at the time just how many years ago that really must have been.

“You're not like your parents,” I blurted out.

She gave me her first frown. “What do you mean?”

“Oh...” I began, stalling to recover, “...I just mean they both seem so serious and businesslike. You seem to be more... fun.”

The laugh was back. “I suppose I am. Mother says I live in a fantasy world. Perhaps I do, but it's a nice place to live. Besides, what could

be a bigger fantasy world than Ovid?"

"Just what is Ovid all about?" I asked. I hoped the question was casual that she would actually answer it.

"It's about fifteen thousand. I already told you that—remember?" It was said with mock seriousness. She knew exactly what I had meant but was obviously not going to give me a straight answer.

"Are you finished?" A voice asked sternly from behind me. It was Minnie—or Ms. Musgrave as I learned she preferred to be called.

"Just finished," I told her.

She looked at me sceptically. "I know you're new here, Julie, in spite of what most of the staff thinks. Are you sure you did it right?"

"I helped her, Mother," Callie chimed in. "A little inspiration was called for."

Her mother looked us both over carefully and then nodded. "I suppose it's all right then," she said at last. Then she nodded at the books we had not placed in the cart to shelve. "Are these my books?"

"Yes, Mother," Callie told her.

Her look softened. "Not bad for the first day, Julie."

She left with that comment. I actually flushed with some pride, for I had a distinct feeling that her praise—faint as it was—would be rare. Callie's nod of approval as her mother left was verification of my feeling.

Callie left me to shelve the books by myself. I was grateful for the time, for it was the first time I had entirely to myself since I was changed. For the first time, I didn't have to pretend to be Julie Cameron. Of course not that that did me a lot of good. I wasn't pretending to be Julie Cameron when I had to get a little ladder to reach the higher shelves—shelves I would have had no trouble reaching in my male body. And I wasn't pretending to be Julie when I had to brush the longish hair out of my face a couple of times. And I certainly wasn't pretending when I dropped a book and realized that if

I picked it up as I would have as a man, I would be exposing things I didn't want exposed.

So in short, the time I spent shelving books by myself did nothing to make me feel like my old self again. I was without a doubt a woman—a married woman—and I was going to have to continue to be one until I could get back before the Judge. I had never felt so powerless in my entire life. I had no option but to be who I seemed to be for the moment.

I found out I got off at five, but I wasn't looking forward to it. Callie had helped me a lot on my first day on the job—and as a woman. As I murmured my goodbyes at the end of the day, I felt as if I was on my way to my own execution. There waiting for me in front of the library was Jeff—my husband. What was expected of me now? Would we go by day care and pick up two squealing children? I didn't think so. There were no pictures of children in my wallet, and what sort of a mother would I be if I didn't have pictures of my children? Would I be expected to fix him dinner? I could do that if I had to. As a life-long bachelor, I had developed fairly good cooking skills.

But what about later? After a nice meal and a pleasant evening of watching television, would Jeff suddenly decide to cap off the evening with a little romp in the hay? I shuddered. There was no way I was going to spread these newly-feminized legs for any man—and certainly not for my worst enemy, even if he didn't remember who he had been.

I was careful to slide into the car seat without exposing myself to several young college boys. They were a bit disappointed, I think. But I had been so worried about what they might see that I wasn't able to avoid Jeff's sudden kiss. I hadn't a gay bone in my body, and other than my father, I had never kissed a man in my life—and certainly not on the lips. It was a strange feeling, but even more oddly, not an unpleasant one. His breath was clean and fresh and his lips firm. Were it not for the slight hint of stubble around his lips, I might have imagined myself back in my old body kissing a woman.

“How was your day?”

“Fine. Yours?”

“Fine.”

Okay, so we got past that part. “You seem tired,” he commented as he drove to wherever we now called home.

“A little,” I agreed. Good, he was giving me the excuse I would need to avoid anything romantic. Yes, I was tired. I just didn’t feel like sex. Now how could I convince him I was tired until I could figure out how to escape Ovid with my old life intact?

“No problem,” he said with a smile as we pulled into the parking lot of a new but fairly small apartment complex. “I’ll cook tonight.”

I left him in the kitchen while I checked out our new digs. The apartment was small and modest with no sign (thank God) of children. In such a small place, I had no problem finding the bedroom we shared. I glanced around, trying to avoid looking at the bed. But I did note that it was a queen size. At least I would be able to have some personal space which a double bed would have limited. I stripped out of my good clothes and got my first good look at my new body. I was svelte but not exactly model thin. My body looked as if it had been well-cared for. Hips, breasts and waist were appropriately feminine, and my legs had the subtle definition of an active lifestyle. I was well tanned, and the tan lines indicated my new body spent a fair amount of time in a two-piece bathing suit. In short, I was the poster child for attractive young professional women of the new century—just the sort who makes an ideal wife and mother. Of course, I had no intention of being either of those. I might already be a wife, but I sure wasn’t going to be an ideal one. And as for being a mother... I could only shudder at the disturbing thought.

I changed into a yellow T-shirt and denim shorts. I would have preferred something more like jeans to the unintentionally sexy shorts, but it had been a warm day and the air conditioning hadn’t cooled the apartment sufficiently for jeans. At least I opted for low-cut socks and sneakers rather than sandals. I thought all the sandals were too feminine and made my legs look too sexy. The last thing I wanted to

parade in front of Jeff was a pair of sexy legs.

I had to admit wonderful smells were coming from the kitchen. It took me back to the days when Andre and I roomed together at Georgetown. Andre had always been an excellent cook, the result he once told me of having an uncle who ran a fine restaurant in New York. Of course, like Andre, Jeff had gone a little overboard. Finely seasoned vegetables simmered in a wok with small, thin strips of pre-cooked chicken mixed in with them while rice simmered on the stove. The table was already set, complete with a chilled bottle of white wine resting in a silver bucket.

“Isn’t all this just a little elaborate?” I asked him, amused in spite of myself.

“But it’s the day before our first anniversary,” he explained sending a chill through my body. “What sort of a husband would I be if I didn’t treat you to a fine meal on the eve of the day?”

Anniversary?

Oh... my... God...

“By the way, our reservations at Winston’s are at seven tomorrow,” Jeff went on. “I know you said you had an appointment at the beauty shop right after work. Go ahead and take the car; I can get a ride.”

I wasn’t going to have to pretend to have a headache to avoid sex; I was really getting one. Dear God, I was practically a newlywed! I was apparently the distaff side of a young, struggling couple (as indicated by the small apartment and single car) who would be spending some of my hard-earned money on a trip to a beauty salon to look good for a big night out. I had to get out of this situation—and fast. But what was I to do?

I suppose I could have made a run for the door, taken the car, and driven as fast out of Ovid as I could. It was tempting. But what would I do even if I got away? I’d still be Julie Cameron, whoever she was. I couldn’t very well go to the Bureau and claim to be Baxter Blaine. They’d lock me away at the nearest funny farm. Besides, I wasn’t

even sure I could get away. I was in a town that didn't even appear on the map, transformed by a local magistrate who had powers the nature of which I couldn't even imagine. Beings with powers like that probably protected the privacy of Ovid somehow. I wouldn't have been at all surprised if driving out of town wasn't even possible.

I ate in relative silence, letting Jeff do most of the talking. He actually reminded me a lot of Andre; he was glib and knew how to make his narratives interesting. I found myself listening to his stories in spite of myself and even commenting a few times. Then, it was apparently my turn.

"So how did your day go?"

Married friends of mine had often remarked that one of the most effective ways of communicating they had found was to relate their experiences at work to their spouses. It had come up in conversation at the Bureau because many of them complained the somewhat secretive nature of their work made such communication difficult. But I supposed there was nothing to prevent me from relating my experiences at the college library that day.

I found as I told him about my day that it actually seemed normal. We had gotten in new books, I had catalogued them and shelved them, and I had talked with Callie. It was all mundane but strangely satisfying, as if the tedious work had merit. When I thought about it, it wasn't as tedious as a stakeout, and as for the merit, young minds would be able to find and use the knowledge I had shelved, so I suppose it did have merit at that.

I offered to clean up the dishes, but Jeff waived me off. "You look tired," he explained. "Why don't you take your wine in the living room and relax? You can watch that video you wanted to see. It's in the VCR."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I wasn't about to argue. The couple of glasses of wine I had enjoyed had mellowed me out. Why not watch something and trundle off to bed? Tomorrow would be soon enough to get out of my predicament, I thought.

The movie was pretty lightweight. It was a Drew Barrymore picture called *Never Been Kissed*. But as light as it was, it was instructive, too. There she was, a grown woman pretending to be a high school student. I imagined that there were a few just like her here in Ovid—grown women who were now having to pose as high school students.

Jeff joined me on the couch and we watched together. He put an arm around me, but that was it. I felt I had no choice but to snuggle up against him. It would have been a little odd for him if I hadn't. And I suppose I have to admit that his touch seemed strangely comforting. Here I was, the proverbial stranger in a strange land. I needed someone to give me some support and reassurance that everything was going to be all right. Although I was sure Jeff had no idea why I would have been concerned, his presence helped.

We both were tired when the movie ended, so he didn't try any funny business. Together we made our way to the bedroom. But if I had felt vulnerable before, being in bed with Jeff made me feel even more so. There I was, lying in bed with nothing but a thin sheet and a thinner set of shortie pajamas between me and Jeff. I had terrible visions of his suddenly getting interested and tearing back the sheet to expose my slim body. What could I do if he did? Oh sure, I could always tell him no, but if he really wanted to force himself on me, I was powerless.

Was this what married women put up with every night? I wondered. As a single male, I had bedded a number of women, but it was by mutual consent. If she said no, nothing happened. On the rare occasions I said no, nothing happened either. But a married woman went to bed with her husband every night. The only question was what would happen once they were there. And if the woman said no, what happened then? I supposed with the right sort of man, nothing happened. But was Jeff the right sort of man? I had no way of knowing, did I?

"Good night," he said, bending over to kiss me. It was a gentle but loving kiss. I even returned it, grateful that he wasn't going to force anything further. But as I lay there in the dark, I remembered that the

next day was supposed to be my anniversary. I would have no choice then, for what sort of a woman would deny her husband a night of lovemaking on their first anniversary. It was imperative that I find a way back to my old life and out of Ovid as soon as the next day came.

“Coffee’s on!”

Those were the first two words I heard when I woke the next morning. I couldn’t imagine who was in my apartment. Then I turned over in bed, feeling my breasts shifting on my chest and it all came back to me. I was a woman. I was Julie Cameron, woman, librarian, and... wife. Shit.

“I’ve got to go in early,” Jeff told me as he munched on a Pop Tart at the foot of our (our!) bed. “Don is picking me up.”

I nodded, a clump of hair falling in my face as I did so. I’d have to do something about that hair—either cut it or constrain it at night. And who the hell was Don? Shit.

“Car keys are on the kitchen table,” he explained, leaning over to give me an unexpected kiss as he spread Pop Tart crumbs over the top of my breasts. Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Happy anniversary,” he called out so cheerfully that I was very sorry now I hadn’t succeeded in killing him.

With a sigh, I managed to get up out of bed. I hadn’t been looking forward to trying to get ready for the day as a girl. The day before, I had been transformed with makeup and hair in place. Now, I had to take care of that myself, and I had no idea how to do it.

It’s probably fortunate that I was so tired. It allowed me to learn something interesting about my transformed existence that no one had bothered to tell me the day before. It really happened as I was standing in the shower. Still half-asleep, I grabbed a razor and after I had soaped my legs and under my arms, I began to shave them as if I had been doing it my entire life. With a start, I pulled the razor away as I realized what I was doing. It had been so natural—as if it was merely

a familiar routine.

I decided to experiment. I closed my eyes as the water droned down on me and went into a relaxed state. As I did, my hand took the razor and gently scraped away the stubble under one arm and then the other. Then came the shampoo and conditioner which I liberally applied to my longish hair. I worked it in with my fingers without a thought, then rinsed thoroughly.

The entire morning routine went that way—wiping after using the john, drying and combing my hair, and even doing my makeup. When I came back to full consciousness, I was fastening the last button on the silky cream-colored blouse I had chosen to go with my tan skirt. I stepped back and looked at myself in the mirror, realizing as I did so that I was much more secure in my heels than I had been the day before.

So Ovid's magic could make me fit in, I thought. That was both good and bad. Just how far would that magic go to see that I fit in? Was there a possibility that I would become like Jeff, unaware that I had ever had a different life from the one I was now experiencing? If so, the price was far too large to pay. But no, I realized, that wasn't likely. More than likely the help I had been given was more along the nature of training wheels on a bike. It would go away when I no longer needed it. That is, when I had been fully assimilated. The need to see the Judge before that happened became even more obvious.

But at least it was nice to leave the apartment confident that I looked normal—for a girl, that is. I didn't feel as if I was some sort of freak. If I wanted to, I could just do what had been suggested to me and let things happen. In no time, I'd be a spunky, happy Julie Cameron. Sorry, but that just wasn't going to happen. Not if I had anything to say about it.

Fortunately, Ovid was small enough I had no problem retracing my route to the library. The only problem was driving as a woman. Given my smaller stature, it was harder to see well out of the car windows. Even though I was used to a car larger than the small Dodge I was now driving, it seemed somehow bigger than it should be. And to

make matters worse, what moron designed the seat belt in cars so that it would cut into a woman's breasts? The Judge should find that idiot and change him into a big-busted girl just to see how well she could drive wearing her own invention.

Callie was at the checkout desk when I got in. That surprised me. I had already learned that most of the time students were on the desk. She wasn't busy, and I called out, "Hi, Callie."

She gave me a funny look. Then, she seemed to understand. She motioned me over. "Hi, you must be Julie." She held out her hand.

Now it was my turn to be confused. Had Callie's memory been stolen from her over night? Did that sort of thing happen often in Ovid? She saw my confusion. "Oh, I'm sorry, Julie. I forgot to mention, I'm not Callie. I'm Erin—Callie's sister."

This time I took the hand. "You're twins?"

She gave me an enigmatic smile. "No, not exactly twins..."

Before I could ask what she meant, a student stepped up to the desk to check out some books. I turned and looked at her to get my next shock of the morning. The student looked just like Erin—and Callie.

"See you later, Terry," Erin called to the student as she gathered up her books and left. She then turned back to me. "Sorry about that. Look, Julie, I know this is all a little confusing..."

"Confusing?" I repeated, looking around to make sure there was no one else to hear. "What could be confusing? I've had my sex changed, watched my worst enemy become my husband, seen transparent people running around a town that shouldn't be here, and now I find out my only new friend in this upside down place is—what—a triplet? Why in heaven's name should I be confused?"

Erin laughed, "I see your point, but I'll make it worse for you. I'm not a triplet either. There are nine of us."

I had thought Callie and her mother might be part of whatever strange forces were behind Ovid, but I had never expected anything like this. "And you all look alike?" I managed to ask.

She nodded. "To some people we look alike. Most don't really notice. They'd never guess us to be sisters."

"Erin," I blurted out, "just what is going on around here?"

She looked at me with sympathy. "Oh you poor thing, I know it's hard for you. It's always hard for newcomers. Tell me, have you ever read any poetry?"

It seemed like an odd question to come back with, so I stupidly shook my head.

"I didn't think so. It's so sad really that the world has gotten so wrapped up in technology and all that when there is so much else to learn and enjoy. Here." She pulled a thick volume from under the desk and handed it to me. "Mother is busy over at the president's office this morning. Why don't you take this back in the stacks and read it? It might help."

All I could do is mutter my thanks and head back for the stacks. Although Erin had simply made a suggestion to me, it just seemed like the right thing to do. I looked down at the book as I walked. The author's name was Ovid...

Like many of my generation, classical literature was something to be avoided. Give me a good Tom Clancy thriller or the like. About as close as I came to classical literature was reading a James Bond novel. Oh sure, I had heard of Ovid. If I really searched my memory, I could remember him being named along with Plutarch and Lucius and a dozen other Roman writers. But I had no idea what men like Ovid had actually written.

Until now.

Without Erin's help, I don't know how long it would have taken me to figure out what was going on in Ovid. One might think because I was an FBI agent that my superior powers of reasoning and deduction would have helped me determine the divine influences behind Ovid. Actually, being an agent was probably more of a hindrance than a help. Most agents are determined, dogmatic individuals who can

spend months or even years collecting and evaluating evidence. Something like Ovid was so obvious but unbelievable that most agents would have tripped all over the answers without realizing what they were.

As impossible as it seemed, I was in a town run by the gods of Greek and Roman myths. No one seemed to be too concerned about how I was spending my morning, so I had time to explore the library. I had laid down the copy of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and gone into the stacks to find a primer on mythology. I settled on a couple of the easier works—something by Graves and another by Hamilton. They were enlightening. It didn't take long to recognize the omnipotent power of Jupiter in the Judge, or the prowess of Mercury in Officer Mercer. I couldn't find any god that had the attributes of Susan Jager. Maybe I had been wrong about her.

But as for Erin and Callie and their seven other sisters, I had no doubts as to their identity. They were the Muses. Calliope and Erato I knew as Callie and Erin. The student Erin had called Terry had to be Terpsichore. I wouldn't have been surprised to meet their six other sisters—Clio, Polyhymnia, Euterpe, Mepomene, Thalia, and Urania—on or around the campus. What better place for Muses to be than a college campus? And then there was Minnie. She was their mother, so she had to be Mnemosyne, the personification of memory. And then there was their father...

Jupiter.

The Judge.

All right, I thought as I put the book aside, I now knew who was behind Ovid but I had no idea why. What possible reason was there for the gods of the ancient world to gather in a small town in Oklahoma? And why did they bother to collect humans? And was there any method to the way they collected humans?

As far as the last question, I had developed a theory. Officer Mercer appeared on the scene just as I had been about to kill Andre. Maybe Andre became fair game when his life would have otherwise ended.

But what about me? I hadn't been about to die. Or had I?

Then it came to me and a queasy feeling settled in my stomach. The warehouse. A gunfight had erupted there right after I left the stakeout. What if I had been there? And who had pulled me out of there? I had a sudden mental picture of Admiral Nepper. Nepper—that was an odd name. Neptune perhaps? Maybe not all of the gods had settled in Ovid.

"So now you know."

I spun around and saw Erin—no, it was Callie. Erin had been wearing jeans and this girl was in a long brown skirt. I looked back at the small stack of books on the table in front of me. "Yes, I know," I admitted. "The Judge is really J... J..." I nearly panicked as my throat seemed to lock up.

"Don't try to say it," she advised. "It's forbidden. But I know what you mean to say, and you're correct. And I assume you know about me and my sisters."

"Yes, you're... I don't even know the word for it. Nontuplets?"

She laughed, "I'm not even sure there is a proper word for it. But we aren't that anyway. We were conceived over nine consecutive days and born that day. And don't bother to ask how that's possible. I probably couldn't tell you even if I knew. Besides, that's ancient history."

"But what's this all about?" I asked her. "Why Ovid? Why have you done this to me—to us?"

"Oh Julie, I know it's hard for you," she said, sitting down beside me. "It's hard for all of you. Sometimes I think the ones who lose all their old memories are the lucky ones. But I couldn't tell you why this is happening even if I knew."

"You... you don't know?"

"How much do you know about Roman mythology?" she asked.

"Just what I've read today," I told her. "That and a few stories I

remember from my childhood.”

“Well, then let me explain how it all works. There’s a definite pecking order among us. Only a handful know all the answers.”

“Gods like Jupiter,” I said. “Hey! I could say it!”

She nodded. “That’s because you were speaking of Jupiter in the mythological sense and not as how he might relate to Ovid. It can be something of a loophole.”

“So what are the rest of the rules?” I asked, not wanting to choke up like I had moments before.

“They’re fairly simple,” she told me. “Don’t try to carry on a conversation like this with more than one person. Don’t try to mention any of our identities out loud. Other than that, just live your life.”

“But I don’t want this life,” I muttered. “I want my real life back. Will Ju... the Judge change me back?”

“He never has changed anyone back,” she replied. Then more ominously, she added, “But he has made further changes upon occasion.”

“I don’t belong here,” I muttered, trying not to think what ‘further’ changes might entail. As much as I disliked being Julie Cameron, I was bright enough to realize there were worse potential fates.

“You don’t think so now, but you’ll fit in before you know it.”

“I’m getting real tired of hearing that!” I snapped. “Everyone says go with the flow and play the part and fit in. Maybe if the Judge had made me a police officer—a male police officer—but not like... like this!”

“So go see the Judge,” Callie advised. “Find out for yourself. I’ll cover for you until you get back.”

She didn’t have to offer a second time. With a muffled thanks, I grabbed my purse and shot out of the room.

It was midmorning and my route took me right through downtown Ovid. I had to admit Ovid was... comfortable. I had grown up in cities

and had always thought of small towns as a place for hicks. But Ovid wasn't like that. It was like a city—just smaller. And safer, I imagined. I was willing to bet no one feared to walk anywhere on the streets of Ovid day or night. And the friendly greetings everyone seemed to give passersby were an indication that there were no strangers in Ovid. Or if there were, they didn't stay strangers long.

I was stopped at a traffic light when I saw Jeff. It was unexpected so I didn't have a chance to honk and wave at him, and he didn't see me. He was just coming out of a little computer shop next to the bank. I had thought he was at the high school, but some errand had apparently taken him downtown. Well, I would ask him about it later.

I began to get butterflies in my stomach as I got out of the car in front of City Hall. It was one thing to try to beard a magistrate—even a magical one—in his own den. It was quite another thing to attempt that with the ruler of the gods. But I had no choice. If I didn't do this, I would be trapped forever. I was facing my anniversary night as well, so if I was to avoid being a wife in deed as well as name, I would have to do it now.

I was surprised to see the blonde I had noticed in court sitting at a terminal outside the Judge's office. I wondered for a moment if she was a god as well. She looked up at me with a pleasant smile. "Hi, Julie, how are things going?"

It was such a friendly question I didn't quite know what to say. I was used to a world where secretaries were guardians at the gate, protecting their bosses with a cold "Yes, can I help you?" coupled with a Medusan stare. "I... I'd like to see the Judge."

I had expected her to tell me to buzz off, but instead, she continued to smile and said, "Sure. He'll be with you in just a minute."

"Uh... how do you know that?"

She laughed and pointed at her computer screen where large letters declared, "TELL JULIE I'LL BE WITH HER IN JUST A MINUTE."

"The Judge is trying to become more computer literate," she

explained. "We had a little problem a few weeks ago that involved computers, so the Judge decided he needed to understand them better. I get messages like this all the time now. Of course, he doesn't bother to use a keyboard but I guess everyone learns in their own way. I'm Cindy Patton, by the way."

She held out a slim hand to me. I shook it and was pleased to note her handshake was as firm as a man's.

"So how do you like Ovid so far?"

"It's okay," I said as noncommittally as I could. "I just..."

When my voice trailed off, Cindy nodded with a knowing smile. "It's hard to play the role of wife, isn't it? I know I had trouble with it when I first got here."

So she wasn't one of the gods. "It's almost impossible," I murmured, thinking as I did that unless I was able to plead with the Judge for the return of my old life, I would be in real trouble about the time Jeff and I got home to celebrate 'our' anniversary.

Cindy took my hand in hers. "Look, Julie, don't worry about it. Just relax and let it happen..."

Go with the flow. Play the part. Try to fit in. Relax and let it happen. Everyone seemed to have exactly the same advice for me. Why didn't anyone tell me to run like hell and try to get away before I had to spread my legs and... and...

"Oh! He's ready for you now."

I tried to smile. "Thanks, Cindy."

"Any time."

The Judge's office was not exactly what I expected. I had figured if there was one place the king of the gods might let down his hair, it was in his private office. Maybe there would be a lightning bolt on the wall and a picture of him and Mars touring the battlefields of the Peloponnesian War or something. Instead, it just looked like the typical office of any small town judge in the country. Comfortable

leather chairs were set in front of a large but timeworn desk of dark oak. There were pictures and diplomas on the wall, but they were of a mundane variety. One picture I noticed showed the Judge shaking hands with an individual I recognized as a former US Attorney General.

“Ah, Mrs. Cameron, please sit down,” he said pleasantly, motioning me to one of the leather chairs.

It all seemed so mundane that I had to remind myself that I was in the presence of a god. I primly sat, smoothing my skirt in a gesture so feminine I’m sure it was not lost on the Judge.

He folded his hands and leaned forward, speaking in a soft yet somehow commanding Oklahoma accent. “Now, what can I do for you today, Mrs. Cameron?” It was as if we were old friends—or at least acquaintances. He was treating me as if I had always been a woman. I suppose that was better than a lot of responses. He could have laughed and pointed at my obvious discomfiture at being a woman.

“I... I know who you are,” I began.

He gave me a small but patronizing smile. “Yes?”

“Yes,” I confirmed. I took a deep sigh and dove in. “I don’t know why you do this to people—why you did this to me. But this isn’t who I am. I’m a man and I have a life. I want it back.”

His face turned as serious as mine as he leaned back in his large leather chair. “I’m curious as to why you should want it back. You had no family and no close friends. Your career was in shambles. You had no patron within the Bureau. Your future—even if you had had one—would have been mediocre, shifting from one forgettable assignment to another. You would be alone and underappreciated. Is that what you are asking me to return you to?”

“You said even if I had one,” I commented, avoiding an answer to his question. “It was the stakeout, wasn’t it? I would have died there.”

The smile returned. “I see my faith in you was not misplaced. Yes, if left alone you would have died in that warehouse shootout. It seemed

like a terrible waste.”

“And Andre became fair game because I would have shot him.”

He nodded. “Yes, you would have shot him. It was an act you would have regretted almost at once, but you had spent years convincing yourself that it was the right thing to do. So you see, I saved both of your lives in a sense. You should be grateful.”

My temper rose. “Grateful—for this? Look at me! I’m a woman. I don’t know how to be a woman and I don’t want to be one. All right, I’ll concede that my real life was flawed, but I didn’t deserve this. At least make me into a man. Even if you can’t—or won’t—give me my old life back, don’t make me endure life in this... this... body.”

Damn this feminine form! I was being emotional—a side effect of my new sex I was certain. There was moisture gathering in my eyes. That’s all I needed—to break down into tears and show the Judge just how much of a woman I had become against my will.

The Judge leaned forward, staring at me with an intensity I had never seen before. “Mrs. Cameron—Julie—you are a woman, now and forever. You will look like a woman and act like a woman because you are a woman. You will do this because it is my will that you do. You have no choice. Do you understand me?”

I wanted to fight him—I really did. I wanted to yell at him and demand that he change me back. I suppose in the back of my mind I even realized that if I angered him sufficiently, he could do even worse to me than he had done. He had made me an attractive woman with a life many women—and men—might have envied. But that wasn’t the reason I didn’t persist. I stopped where I was because I knew any further argument was futile. I was who I was. I was Julie Cameron and I would remain Julie Cameron for the rest of my life.

“Do you understand?” It was said with undeniable force.

“I understand,” I replied meekly, my eyes a little downcast.

As quickly as it had disappeared, the smile returned. “Then we are in agreement. Thank you for coming by today. Now, if you’ll excuse

me...”

I nodded, although he didn’t see it. He had already returned to the papers on his desk. Numbly, I clutched my purse and fled from the office.

“Julie...”

It was the blonde secretary. She called to me the moment I had closed the Judge’s door behind me. I turned to her, hoping my face wasn’t too puffy.

“I know how it went,” she said sympathetically, standing to take my hands in hers. “A lot of people try it. I know I did. I’ve never seen him change anyone back.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that?” I asked softly.

“Would it have stopped you?”

I shook my head, feeling the longish hair swirl about my neck. “No, I suppose not. So now what?”

“Now you live your life,” she told me. “At least give it a try, Julie. You’ll find being a woman has its compensations. And besides, you can’t fight it forever.”

“Come on over to the pink side, eh?”

“If you like pink.” She smiled. I smiled back. Well, at least I had made a new friend.

The rest of the afternoon went by all right, I guess. For the most part, I was left alone. Callie did flag me down once to introduce me to Cleo and Polly, two more of her sisters. Except for clothes, they looked identical to Callie and Erin. Cleo was a history instructor—that figured since I had read Clio was the muse of history. Polly’s forte was mime though which was hardly a usable skill, I thought. I was wrong though, I was sure, but she didn’t mention what she did for a living. Come to think of it, she hadn’t spoken at all, leaving the conversation to her sisters.

“Say don’t you have a beauty appointment over at March’s?” Callie

asked as her sisters left.

I had been trying to forget about that. Jeff had mentioned it, but I thought I'd just blow the appointment off. I had no desire to make myself more attractive for him. If I had my way, I'd have an ugly appointment to make myself so awful that he wouldn't want to touch me.

Callie didn't wait for an answer. "Come on, get out of here. You don't want to be late."

"Yes I do," I replied. "I don't want to go at all."

"Didn't your little meeting with the Judge convince you that you're stuck as Julie forever?"

"Yes," I admitted with a sigh. "It's just that I'm..."

Frightened.

I didn't want to say it, but I was frightened. I had never been married, but I knew the ritual of an anniversary date. I'd be all dolled up and Jeff would be at his handsome best. We'd eat a nice meal—probably the finest a small town like Ovid had to offer—and drink some wine. We'd both get a little tipsy and go back to our place where I'd be expected to dress in something lacy and revealing. Then we'd get down to it—once, twice, maybe even three times before falling asleep naked in each other's arms. Not me. No way, Jose.

"Julie, it isn't going to get any easier if you put it off."

"But it's not real!" I argued. "I'm not really this person. I'm not even really a woman. Maybe if I'd been changed into a single woman—maybe even high school or college age—I might be able to learn to cope as a female over time. I don't love Jeff—hell, I tried to kill him before we changed into Ken and Barbie. I just can't do it."

She took my hands. "Promise me you'll at least keep your appointment. Then after that, you can decide how to handle the evening. Okay?"

Her touch had a calming effect. I don't think it was magic; it was just

support from one person to another. I supposed she was right. What would it hurt to keep my appointment? I knew where March's was. I had seen the department store when I drove through the business district on my way to see the Judge. Besides, it was easier to go than to explain to Jeff why I didn't.

March's Department Store was never going to give Macy's a run for its money, but it was still the largest retail establishment in the business district. The building was three floors high, and the beauty salon was on the top floor. To get there, I had to walk past row after row of women's clothing. I tried not to think about the fact that I would have to be buying my clothes in places like this in the future.

"Hi, Julie," an attractive if slightly over-made-up blonde said as I walked in. Then her eyebrows arched a little. In a quieter tone, she said, "Are you feeling not quite yourself today?"

It would have been an odd question anywhere but Ovid. I could tell from her look that she wasn't just asking about my health. "I've experienced some big changes lately," I replied equally cryptically.

"Come on back," she said motioning for me to follow her to the rearmost chair. "Lila," she called. "Julie's here. I'm putting her in the last chair."

"Okay," a young Hispanic girl called from the front of the salon where she was just ringing up another customer.

"We can talk during your manicure," the blonde told me as she put a plastic apron over me.

"Manicure?" I asked, but it was too late. I was alone.

I felt as if I was about to be executed and was just awaiting the executioner to pull the lever. I didn't have the slightest notion what to say or do. I tried going on automatic, but that just seemed to work for unconscious actions. No glib thoughts came into my head from it.

The Hispanic girl—Lila—finally came back. When I seemed hesitant, she asked, "Big night out tonight?"

"Uh... my first anniversary."

“Oooh!” Lila said, her dark eyes unnaturally wide. “That is a big night. How you want to look?”

Like a truck driver, I felt like saying—a very male truck driver. Instead, I meekly asked, “Can you not change it too much?”

She laughed, “So you want to be conservative, huh?”

Lila was the first shade to touch me, and I was surprised to find that she was as solid as I. She worked smoothly, telling me about her own first anniversary in more graphic detail than I could ever have imagined. She slyly added, “The first anniversary is a good time to make them do things they haven’t done before.” I suppose I was expected to ask her what things she meant but I was afraid I already had a good idea. I wondered, though, did all women talk so openly about their sex lives? When men talked about it, it never involved wives. Oh sure, men might talk about some hot conquest they had picked up in a bar or something, but never about their wives. But the conversations I heard around me were not unlike Lila’s. Women—or at least some women—seemed to talk more freely about their sex lives with their husbands than I would have ever imagined. I was beginning to wonder if maybe men weren’t really the sexually repressed gender.

“There. Now while your hair is soaking, you go see Bobbi Sue up front.”

I realized she was talking about the blonde I had spoken with on the way in. I felt like some sort of mobile radar antenna as I walked to the front, still covered by the plastic apron. My hair was up in curlers soaking in some sort of smelly solution. I knew enough about the process to realize my hair would be loosely curled when the process was over. I hoped it would be easier to take care of than it had been so far. If I had to be stuck as a woman, I might as well hack off most of my hair. I cursed myself for not telling them to do that right then, but somehow it didn’t seem the thing to do just yet.

“Sit down,” the blonde said with a grin. “I’m Bobbie Sue. You all ready to get your nails done?” When she saw how ill at ease I was, she giggled and said quietly, “I figured you remembered who you used to

be. Sit down. You musta been a guy, right?"

"Gee, how could you tell?" I said sarcastically. I doubted if any naturally-born woman would look as uncomfortable in a salon as I did.

"Don't worry, I've seen a lot of folks just like you. You shoulda seen that little lawyer, Susan Jager, the first time she was in here."

"Susan Jager used to be a man?"

"Shh, keep it down," Bobbie Sue cautioned as she took one of my hands and began to work on it. "It doesn't do much good to be talkin' too loud about all this. Nobody else in here remembers who they were—either that or they're shades."

"But you remember."

"Course I do, sugar. Now tell me, what's the occasion? I haven't seen the shade that was you in here in a long time."

"My first anniversary," I muttered. "Now I suppose you're going to tell me just to go along with it, right?"

She shrugged, picking up another finger to work on. "That'd be the easiest way. That's for sure. You might as well get used to it. You aren't goin' anywhere else real soon."

"Were you a man?" I asked, becoming curious in spite of myself. Bobbie Sue seemed a little different somehow. I suspected her down-home pattern of speech was as much an act as it was part of her real character. She seemed to throw herself into the role of the stereotypical manicurist with gusto.

"That's considered to be a rude question around here," she grinned.

"But yeah, I was a man."

"So..." I began, choosing my words as carefully as I could, "...what's it like. I mean, to make... love to..."

"A man?" she finished for me. "Well, you gotta understand as a man I was gay, so I guess it's about the same except we fit together better now."

I had to smile at her earthy reply in spite of myself.

“Is Bobbi Sue taking good care of you?” a woman’s voice came from behind me. Even before I turned to see who had spoken, I knew the woman was beautiful. No one with a voice as feminine as hers could have been otherwise.

When I did turn, I saw a woman who had to be the most beautiful creature on the face of the planet. To say that she was a blonde would not do justice to the golden color of her hair. It shone with a brilliance that could have come from spun gold. Her complexion was flawless, and her blue eyes had a depth to them that could have drowned a man. Her figure was perfect for the tailored gray suit that she wore, and the full breasts beneath her white silk blouse were full and perfectly formed. Her legs were perfection itself ending in trim ankles and small, feminine feet encased in two-inch heels. I don’t know if she was wearing hose or not; her skin was so perfect she really wouldn’t have needed them.

I felt something I never expected to feel when looking at a woman, though. I felt envy. My rational mind told me I should be feeling lust but I didn’t. I felt only envy. If I could have looked like this woman... But no, that wasn’t true. I was a man, wasn’t I? I didn’t want to be a woman—any woman. But still, she was incredible...

“Your nails look marvellous,” the woman said with a warm smile. “How are you today, Julie? I haven’t seen you in a while.”

I looked furtively at her nametag: Vera March—as in March’s Department Store I realized. I also realized this was not just another errant traveller transformed into an Ovid resident. This was a representative of the gods, for such perfection doesn’t exist in the normal world. “Thanks... Vera,” I managed, looking down at my nails. I knew Bobbi Sue had just begun to work on them, so there was no way that she would have had time to shape them so perfectly and coat them with a deep dark red polish. Vera March must have finished them herself. Either that or time had simply stood still as I gazed into Vera March’s deep blue eyes.

“We just hired Bobbi Sue away from M’Lady, and she’s doing such a fine job for us,” she added. “Aren’t you, Bobbi Sue?”

Bobbi Sue smiled at the complement, but she, too, knew it was Vera who should get the credit for this job.

“Now, I understand it’s your first anniversary,” Vera said. “Have you decided on a dress to wear?”

“Uh... no.”

“Well, what are you getting Jeff?”

“Uh...” I hadn’t thought of any of that, I realized with a queasy feeling in my stomach. I had been concerned about just one thing: how to keep from having sex with Jeff. Everything else had been just meaningless details. If I was going to play the part, shouldn’t I have a gift for him? As for how I would dress...

“Well, I’ll have to spend some time with you then,” Vera sighed. “Come on, let’s get you ready.”

She gently took my hand, but I said, “Wait! Shouldn’t I finish with my hair and all this first?”

Vera smiled at me. “All what, dear? You look just lovely as you are.”

In stunned silence, I realized I was no longer wearing the plastic apron, and my hair was no longer wet and in rollers. I turned and looked in the mirror. My hair... it was... was...

“Gorgeous,” Vera laughed, and I knew she was really completing my thought. “We do good work, don’t we?”

Bobbi had gone back to work so Vera and I were alone. I looked at her and murmured, “You did this, didn’t you?”

“Of course, dear,” she laughed. “There was simply no time to waste. We have so much to do before you’re ready. And don’t worry about paying. It’s already on your March’s charge account—with a generous tip I’m sure the girls will appreciate.”

I felt like Cinderella standing in awe as her Fairy Godmother

transformed her into a beautiful lady fit for the ball. I had very little input in what came next. Vera practically dragged me from rack to rack, holding a dress up to me, either smiling or frowning as she did so. I should have protested. I should have told her that I didn't want to look beautiful for Jeff or any other man for that matter. But I couldn't. There was something... indefinable about Vera that required my cooperation, and in spite of myself, I began to throw myself into the effort with a certain amount of élan of my own.

"There!" she said at last.

I suppose there comes a moment in the life of every transformed person in Ovid when they look in the mirror and say, "Oh my God, that's really me." It is a sense of identity—a recognition that their bodies, although changed beyond all recognition, are theirs. I had that strange feeling when Vera led me to a mirror. How much of the feeling was natural and how much was the result of Vera's magic I couldn't say. I only knew that in a town run by the gods, Vera had to be Venus, the very essence of beauty.

And her magic had made me beautiful as well. Oh, not in the classic sense. As Julie Cameron, I was hardly a classic beauty. But what beauty I had had been brought to the surface. I was wearing a traditional little black dress that showed off my figure to the maximum. My breasts looked full without being obscenely large. My hair, of course, was perfection, and a trip to the makeup counter had transformed my face into a thing of beauty. My lightly tanned skin looked almost pale against the midnight black of the dress. My legs, covered in smoky hose, looked sleek and feminine, and poised as I was on heels that must be nearly three inches high, I looked practically like a model.

"Well, what do you think?" Vera asked in an almost hypnotic voice.

"I... I... I don't know what to think," I murmured.

"You're really quite lovely."

"Y... Yes."

“And desirable.”

“Desirable?”

“Oh yes,” she assured me.

Lovely, desirable—these were words being used to describe me. They seemed somehow... right. It was as if I were in a fog—a warm, enveloping fog that soothed and relaxed me, taking all of my fears away.

I don't really remember leaving March's, but before I knew it, I was driving up in front of our apartment building. Shaking my head in an unsuccessful attempt to clear it, I noticed as I got ready to get out that there was a small, elegantly wrapped package on the car seat next to me. Picking it up, I read the tag: 'To Jeff with all my love, Julie.' It was written in my own handwriting—my new handwriting that is. I didn't remember picking up a package, and I certainly didn't remember writing the tag. With a helpless shrug, I gathered up the package and headed for the apartment.

“You look absolutely incredible,” Jeff said, opening the door for me. His eyes tracked up and down my body, stopping at all the spots I would have stopped at if I had been he. I felt strangely both uncomfortable and flattered by his prolonged gaze. I guess I couldn't blame him. Vera March and her staff had done a fantastic job. My mind still thought enough like a man to know that she had coaxed every gram of beauty out of a merely cute body.

And to be completely honest, Jeff looked pretty good himself. He cleaned up nicely. Standing there in a gray pinstripe suit and stylish tie, he might have been taken for a rising young lawyer or businessman—maybe a banker. To my surprise, I realized I was also noticing what was in the suit as well. Jeff was young, strong and handsome. I could not seem to tear my eyes away from him.

And my mind was so frozen that I couldn't resist as he bent over and brushed his lips against mine. It felt strangely good. No, better than good—it felt... wonderful. “Maybe I should cancel our dinner reservation,” he suggested softly as he put his arm gently around me.

My body was perfectly willing to do just that, but my mind was still in control—sort of. “No... no, don’t do that?”

“Ravenous little thing, are you?” he laughed. “Okay, let’s go then.”

He stopped as he noticed the package in my hand. “From March’s, eh?” he said with approval. “Why don’t you leave it here and we’ll open our gifts... later.”

There was firm promise in the word ‘later.’ I knew he didn’t just mean after a nice meal. There was no way out of this, I realized. This was a night any normal married couple would have looked forward to and savored. But we weren’t any normal couple, were we?

I knew as Jeff led me to the car that a spell had been placed on me. In a way, I was grateful for it. This night was going to happen whether I wanted it to or not. I might as well have my anxieties take back seat to my desires. Desires? Yes, desires. I might not want to be a woman but I was one. And as a woman, my body spoke to me, demanding that it be satisfied, and no amount of cold male logic was going to be able to deny it forever.

Winston’s was a pleasant little steakhouse on the edge of town. It was on a small wooded hill and actually enjoyed a view of Ovid spread out in the valley below. Inside, warm red carpet and drapes and classical music playing softly gave the place an atmosphere not unlike some of the small neighborhood establishments I remembered from my Georgetown days.

Of course Ovid was not exactly the place for an anonymous rendezvous. Although I had only been in Ovid a few days, I saw several people I knew. The attorney, Susan Jager, was there seated with a very handsome man I assumed was her husband. She didn’t notice me, though. She was too busy looking into her companion’s eyes. I saw several people I recognized as faculty and staff at Capta, including Elizabeth Vest, the president of the college. And Vera March was there as well, seated with a man I presumed to be her husband. He, too, was handsome, but in an almost fierce sort of way. He looked up at me and assessed me as I suspected he would have had I been

a succulent steak on the restaurant's menu. I turned away at once.

The hostess showed us to a small table away from the crowd. I was happy to be at least somewhat secluded. It wasn't that I planned to do anything terribly intimate, but Vera March's husband had not been the only male in the place to let his gaze linger on my body.

I really don't remember much from dinner. Oh, Jeff and I talked, had fabulous steaks, and shared a bottle of wine that could have graced the tables of many Washington restaurants, but it was all surreal to me. The wine, the rich food, and the suspected spell Vera March must have placed on me all combined to make the meal almost like something out of a dream. Notice I said a dream and not a nightmare. I have to admit, it was a pleasant experience.

All through the meal, I kept 'noticing' Jeff. It was if I hadn't really looked at him before. Now, his every move was the subject of my rapt attention. When he smiled, my heart would become warm. When his hand would touch mine, I would feel a thrill go through my body. I'm sure my male mind was still there, but it was hidden well as I fell under Jeff's spell.

Jeff held me tight as we left the restaurant, and through the fog of the wine and the spell, I realized the moment of truth was about to arrive. I didn't have to be a woman all my life to know what was coming next, and whatever rational male thoughts that still inhabited my mind were trying to find some plausible way to stop the inevitable. But my body liked being held and snuggled closely against Jeff as we walked back to the car. I continued to nestle against him in the car and again on the way into the apartment.

There were no words between us there in the dark of our living room. No words were necessary, nor would they have changed what was about to happen for better or worse. I had decided to give in to the needs of my body. The male side of my mind decided it must be the same attribute of the mind that allows a condemned prisoner to remain calm as he is prepared for execution. But execution could never have felt as good as I was feeling.

I don't even know for sure when we moved from the living room to the bedroom, but we did, never taking our hands off each other. I felt the dress Vera had selected for me slide smoothly down my legs as I stripped Jeff out of his tie and shirt. The feel of his rugged chest against my smooth one felt delicious, and I longed to have my bra removed and feel the hair of that chest against my straining nipples. Fortunately, I didn't have to wait long.

Why did I ever dread this? I wondered as we fell into the bed together, naked. What was there to dread? Had I been afraid to have my body entered? Had I been fearful that my lack of strength would make me an unwilling participant in my psychological—if not physical—deflowering? Whatever the reason, fear fled from me the moment we embraced there on the bed in that dark room.

I don't know how much of my need was the result of the Judge's original spell and how much was the result of whatever Vera March had done to me, but wherever it came from, it just felt... right to be there lying in Jeff's arms. I felt the new crevasse between my legs moisten, and I could detect its feminine aroma. It was begging to be touched... to be aroused still further.

I didn't have long to wait. Jeff's hand moved between my legs, stroking my aroused clitoris. It was almost like having a hard penis again. No, that's not right; it felt very different, for as he stroked me there, the waves of pleasure I felt coursed through my entire body, just centering on my new clitoris. I had never felt anything like it in my entire life.

Without thinking, I spread my legs and mumbled something to Jeff. He rightly took it as a signal that I wanted him inside me. I gave a little gasp of surprise as something large and firm began to gently slip into me...

And we never did get our gifts opened that night.

I awoke the next morning to the smell of freshly brewed coffee. I was alone in bed, and to my dismay completely naked. I had slept in the buff. Maybe it was the smell of the coffee, and maybe it was the smell

of the fresh morning air, but my head seemed clearer than it had been in some time. I had no doubts about what I had done the night before. I had given myself to Jeff. Strangely, I also had no regrets. I still felt odd inside a woman's body, but I felt somehow... satisfied, and being satisfied overcame the oddity.

I stretched, wincing a little as the sheet slid along my nipples, made hard by the morning breeze. I was still thinking about getting up when Jeff's face appeared at the bedroom door. "Breakfast in five minutes."

"But I'm not dressed!" I protested.

He shrugged. "Then come down as you are."

I had to smile at that. "I think that might not be a good idea. Breakfast might get cold."

"Then if you must, slip on a robe," he sighed in mock disappointment. Or maybe he really was disappointed. Something told me he wouldn't be disappointed long.

I slipped on a silky robe that was short and thin, but its white material at least covered the bare essentials. A day before, I would have been afraid to appear before him in so little. I would have been afraid he would jump me on the spot. Now, as hungry as I was, I rather hoped he would.

I was a little ashamed at myself for fearing sex with Jeff. I suppose many real girls felt the same way before their first experience, so maybe I could be forgiven. I had found sex as a woman to be a fantastic experience, completely different than it had been as a man. Or maybe it wasn't so different, I thought as Jeff put a steaming plate in front of me. Maybe it was just more satisfying.

"Eat it before it gets cold," he urged, turning back to dish up his own meal. I looked down at my plate. Breakfast looked heavenly. There was Canadian bacon grilled to perfection, fluffy scrambled eggs with salmon, cream cheese, and scallions folded in, and diced potatoes in butter and dill. It was a breakfast fit for a king—or queen now, I supposed. In spite of my smaller stomach and reduced appetite, I

dove into the plate with gusto, washing it down with fresh orange juice and some of that eye-opening coffee.

“What do you think?” he asked as he sat down with his own plate.

“Marvellous!” I said in a most unladylike fashion, my mouth still full. And it was. Apparently some things transferred over when Andre became Jeff. Andre had always been a wonderful cook. In college, he was known for conjuring up incredible meals while most of us would content ourselves with something from a box. To be invited to eat with Andre had always been a treat. No more than Barbara liked to cook, I often thought it had something to do with her decision to marry him.

But this wasn’t Andre I had to remind myself. This was Jeff. This was my... my husband. This was my lover.

“Something wrong?”

I looked up and saw him gazing at me with concern. “What? Oh... no. I was just daydreaming.”

He jumped up. “Well, while you’re in such a mellow mood, I didn’t get much of a chance to give this to you last night.” With a flourish, he handed me a nicely wrapped package. Once more I noticed the distinctive paper of March’s Department Store.

“Oh!” I said suddenly. “I have one for you, too.” Thanks to Vera March, I could have added. I rose quickly and gathered my own package from the living room where I had left it the previous evening. Jeff smiled as I handed it to him. “Uh... happy anniversary,” I managed.

We looked at each other nervously, as if uncertain as to what to do with the gifts we held. I suppose it wasn’t all that unnatural. This was supposed to be just our first anniversary. At last with self-conscious smiles, we began unwrapping together. Jeff was quicker, ripping the colorful paper to shreds while I was more careful, making certain that the bow wasn’t damaged. I suppose we unwrapped our gifts in ways that were representative of our sexes. Maybe I was even more of a woman than I thought I was. Somehow, that didn’t bother me as much as it should have.

“Hey, this is great!” Jeff said, admiring the new watch the package contained. “I guess you took note when I talked about how much trouble I was having with my watch.”

I gave him a small smile as an answer. Of course, until he opened it, I had had absolutely no idea what the package contained. Apparently, Vera March knew he needed a new watch. How much did these gods know about us anyway? I shuddered to think.

My box contained a pair of earrings—small diamonds in a gold setting. As a man, I had never paid much attention to jewelry, but I knew enough to know there were few women in the country who wouldn’t be pleased with such a gift. “They’re lovely,” I managed, choosing the descriptive word carefully. I knew it was a word a woman would use. And to be honest, I did consider them lovely. There was no doubt I was changing and changing rapidly into the woman I appeared to be.

“Vera March helped me pick them,” he explained. “She said you’d like them.”

“Very much,” I replied. “I thought maybe you were buying me a computer.”

“Oh, why did you think that?”

“I saw you coming out of a computer store downtown earlier yesterday—Del’s Computers.”

Was I wrong, or did his face cloud for just a moment? If so, he was back to normal in a heartbeat. “I was just snooping around over my lunch hour. You know, just seeing what was new. One of the other teachers and I went downtown for lunch and I had some extra time to kill.”

“Oh. Well I’m glad you didn’t get me a computer.” I leaned over and kissed him. Then he kissed back, and the next thing I knew, we were back in the bedroom. There was no wine or subtle spell to help me this time, but I managed without them.

The rest of the weekend went far better than I would have imagined it going only a day or two before. Like most young married couples, we

managed to entertain ourselves modestly. Household chores were followed by another round in the bedroom. A modest dinner at a place called Rusty's Burger Barn followed by a movie led to another tryst in the bedroom. And to be honest, every time we ended up in the bedroom, I enjoyed myself just that much more. It was hard for me to imagine that only a couple of days before, I dreaded the prospect of making love. It was such a natural thing for this new body of mine to do. If I had to be stuck in Ovid, at least I had found something positive about the experience.

Sunday was in some ways a repeat of Saturday. A long, leisurely breakfast, some more housework, a quick shopping trip to buy groceries, and an evening snuggling in front of the television were the extent of our activities. We only made it to the bedroom once that day, but it was a good trip and I was well satisfied.

I tried to think back about how I had spent my weekends in my old life. Notice I said my old life and not my real life. This new life had become the real one for me in a surprisingly short amount of time. Anyhow, my leisure time in my old life seemed to be a dry existence. I could recall sleeping late, watching a lot of sports on television, working out, and eating alone. Alone—that was the operative word. I began to realize that in my old life, I had never had anyone to share my experiences with. Dating was infrequent and shallow, and my friends were casual at best. There had never been anyone like Jeff since college.

And in college there had been Andre. How strange that my best friend from so many years ago had become my best friend again—and more. But he wasn't really the same person, I reminded myself. Jeff had none of Andre's memories, and although I would sometimes see little things about him that reminded me of Andre, I was sure they were just typical things about all men. When I was a man, I had probably had them myself.

So this is where I should add, and they lived happily ever after, but life isn't always a fairy tale—even in a magical town like Ovid. I had thought after that glorious weekend that it was time to forget the man I had been and forget that Andre had ever existed. But it wasn't to be.

I suppose what I experienced over the next few days has happened to countless women all over the world. Like those women, I reconciled myself to a life of marriage and perhaps even eventual motherhood. Jeff seemed to be everything a young woman would want in a husband: loving, considerate, handsome, and very skilled in pleasing a woman. In short, day-by-day and even hour-by-hour I found myself becoming more satisfied with the hand I had been dealt by the Judge.

And why shouldn't I be? Although some might find it strange that I adapted so quickly and so completely, it would be no surprise to them if they knew me well. Since my sister's death, I had been alone—completely alone. I think it's fair to say that I could have been alone in a crowd. Oh sure, I knew a lot of people, but they fell into one of four categories: associates at the Bureau, suspects, witnesses and victims. As Julie, I was starting to realize that Baxter Blaine had no personal life worth mentioning. In my new life, I had come to realize why Inspector Javert in *Les Misérables* flings himself off the bridge. My life had been as empty and meaningless as his, and like Inspector Javert, I had discovered that the nemesis I had sought for so long and so hard was not the villain I thought him to be—or at least not now. I wonder what Javert would have made of his life if there had been someone like the Judge to transform him into a young woman.

Julie Cameron seemed to have the life that I had lacked. She—I—was attractive, personable, affectionate, and more satisfied with life than Baxter Blaine ever could be. And to top it all off, I had Jeff.

But Jeff was not who I thought he was—at least not exactly. There was not a single thing that told me that, though. Instead, it was a collection of little things. For example, as the new week progressed, I would call Jeff at school, just to see if he wanted to have lunch or to see how his day was going. On a couple of occasions, he wasn't there to take the call. In and of itself, that wasn't all that suspicious, but I had called at times that I understood he was supposed to be there.

Add to that his long runs. He started getting up extra early in the morning to take a five-mile run. Since it was summer, the mornings were bright and warm, and his reasoning was very good. He was,

after all, the track coach, and staying in shape was important to his job. So again, his behavior was not suspicious, but when other things were considered...

Such as the phone calls. They were quick and consisted of just a few short replies on Jeff's part. When I would ask him who had called, he always had a ready and reasonable answer, but something wasn't quite right about the calls.

As I said, by themselves none of Jeff's activities would have been suspicious. And while all of these things happened, he remained loving and attentive. We never had a harsh word and the lovemaking was absolutely perfect. But by the middle of the week, I had grown suspicious.

I had found that Ovid was a nice place, but it wasn't perfect. It was designed to be natural but not perfect. It was rife with the same problems and blemishes of every town in spite of its prosperity. There were minor car wrecks and drunk driving charges. The newspaper carried obituaries. Dusty pickup trucks loaded with rough working men frequented Randy Andy's, a bar on the main highway. In short, the town was normal—with the apparent exception of drugs and crime, for there appeared to be no drugs or crime to speak of in the entire town.

And in normal towns, normal people have normal problems. People get into financial trouble. They have problems with their jobs. They have difficulty relating to their children (or their parents). And they have marital problems. Spouses cheat on each other.

Was that what was happening to me? Was Jeff—by all rights the perfect husband—cheating on me? The time when I couldn't reach him—was he with another woman? Another woman. How quickly my mindset had changed so that I now thought of myself as a woman. What other possible reason could there be, especially when I considered the phone calls and maybe even the long runs?

"What's wrong?"

I looked up at the sound of Jeff's voice. I had been so lost in thought, I hadn't heard him come home. It was Wednesday afternoon, and I had

gotten a ride home with Callie and yet another of her sisters, Terry. I had expected to find Jeff already home since a call to the school had indicated that he had left an hour before me. But when I got home, there was no sign of him.

I had tried to deny to myself that there was anything wrong, but Jeff's mysterious disappearances were becoming too frequent. "Where were you?" I asked, sniffing a bit.

He looked at me with what appeared to be genuine concern. "I hit a bucket of balls out at the country club," he explained. We weren't members, but as a coach, I knew he had golfing privileges at the club. Small town country clubs have always been liberal about golf course usage since they often have the only course. It was a logical explanation. I just wasn't sure I believed him.

"I was worried about you," I muttered. "I called the school and they said you'd left an hour before I got home."

He gave me a disarming smile. "Well, you shouldn't have worried. What did you think was wrong?"

What was I supposed to do—tell him I suspected him of cheating on me? I couldn't bring myself to do that. What would he think if I was wrong? Or worse yet, what would he say if I was right? How could I have possibly gotten myself in such a situation? A week earlier, I would have blanched at the prospect of being a woman and having sex with a man. Now, here I was, a woman in body and rapidly becoming one in thought as well. Not only did I not cringe at the prospect of making love to a man, but I actually looked forward to it. Even thinking about the possibility that Jeff was cheating on me, I wanted him to take me into the bedroom right then and prove to me that it was me who he loved best.

"I... I didn't know if anything was wrong," I hedged. "I just..." I couldn't finish because I couldn't think of anything to say that would make sense.

Jeff put an arm around me. "Look, you're upset. You need to get out of the house. You haven't started anything for dinner yet, have you?"

“No...”

“Then let’s get something at Duggan’s and take it over to Sooner Park. We’ll have ourselves a real picnic.”

It was a romantic idea, I realized. How could I possibly think such a great guy could be cheating on me? Surely the Judge wouldn’t have done that to me—he wouldn’t change me into the wife of a philanderer, would he? It had to be my imagination running away with me. Maybe it was the new hormones racing through my body. Maybe women are just more suspicious, and now that I was one I was, too. I managed a little smile. “Okay, let me get out of this skirt.”

“You look great in that skirt.”

I blushed. “Thank you, but I need to change.”

“Then I will, too,” he laughed.

I was as shy as a schoolgirl, changing in the bathroom while Jeff changed in the bedroom. I was afraid if we stripped down in front of each other, we’d never make it to Sooner Park, and I needed to get out. I needed to be out in the warm, fresh evening air, strolling about after dinner as I held onto Jeff’s hand.

Late afternoons in Oklahoma are very warm, so I dressed in a white tank top and denim shorts. I don’t think as Julie that I owned a pair of loose-fitting shorts. The ones I put on were very short and very tight, but I decided to stay with them. I chose tan sandals with just a hint of a heel. I thought I looked very pert and sexy.

Pert? Sexy? Why was I dressing that way? Okay, so I had come to terms with being a woman, but wasn’t this just a casual outing? Why was I taking so much time with my hair and makeup? I was acting like a sixteen-year-old girl going out on her first date with the high school quarterback.

But I needn’t have questioned myself, for I knew the answer. I was afraid of losing Jeff.

My spirits picked up a little when he gave me an approving stare and offered, “Maybe we should just have our picnic right here.”

It was tempting. In shorts and a polo shirt, Jeff looked very handsome. But I needed some exercise besides rolling around on the bed. I needed to walk, smell the fresh air, and clear my mind.

To say that I had a good time that day would have been an understatement. The body I had been given was young and athletic, and Jeff and I had a good time just walking through the park. While neither of us had said it, our real objective had been to find a secluded spot where we could enjoy our modest picnic and not worry about prying eyes.

We found just the spot we were looking for. The backside of Sooner Park ends in a rustic wood fence. Beyond the fence is a gully guarded by scrub trees, and beyond that is a meandering street with a few houses, nearly inaccessible because of the gully. It was the perfect spot to be alone. We spread out a cloth for the food and a blanket for ourselves—even the magic of Ovid didn't seem to be defense against the chiggers that lived in the grass.

As we ate, my mood brightened, but Jeff became more pensive. His meal of cold chicken and hard-boiled eggs finished, he was staring out across the darkening park, a bottle of cold lemonade in his hand.

"A penny for your thoughts," I said, sliding closer to him and taking his arm.

"Oh... I was just thinking..." he said softly.

"About...?"

He shrugged. "About the funny little twists and turns life has," he said cryptically. Then he looked at me. "Julie, are you happy here... with me?"

I sighed, "I can't think of anyplace else I rather be." It sounded convincing because it was true. My life before Ovid had been meaningless. I had spent the last few years of my life plotting revenge over my sister's death. And what had I accomplished? I had no family and I had damaged my career beyond repair. Now, I had Jeff. And Jeff could be just the beginning...

He took my hand and looked into my eyes. “Do you really mean that?”

For an answer, I kissed him. It was a long meaningful kiss. One thing led to another after that. I was grateful that there was no one else nearby and that it was dark by the time I cried out in ecstasy.

I think if it hadn’t happened, I would have made Jeff perform again the minute we walked in the door of our apartment. But it did happen—the phone rang. “I’ll get it,” Jeff volunteered as I headed off for the bedroom.

But Jeff was a little late. I actually picked up the phone a moment before he did, but before I could speak, I heard Jeff say, “Hello?”

I was about to hang up when I heard a familiar voice—a woman’s voice—angrily say, “Where were you?”

“Oh, we just went out for a little picnic,” Jeff said in a conversational tone, obviously to allay any suspicions I might have if I hear him on the phone. Of course, he had no idea that I was on the phone, too.

“You were supposed to see me.”

I nearly gasped at her words. Oh my God, I had been right. Jeff was having an affair, and with... Callie? No, I couldn’t be sure about that. All of Callie’s sisters looked and sounded the same—at least to me. Were they like the shades, though, in that those of us who retained our memories could see through whatever disguise they used to appear different to the others?

“That just wasn’t possible. How about tomorrow?” Jeff asked.

“Yes. The usual time. Does she still think you’re going for morning runs?”

“That’s right.”

“Then come by in the morning.”

“Fine.”

I was in the bathroom when he got off the phone and made it to the bedroom. I had rushed in there for two reasons—I didn’t want him to

know I had been on the phone and I didn't want him to see me crying. I heard him rummaging around the room for a minute and then going back into the living room. That gave me a chance to hurriedly get ready for bed. By the time he came back into the room, I was in bed with the lights out.

"Julie?"

"Yes?" I replied, trying to make it sound as if he had just awakened me.

"I love you."

"I love you, too." I hoped it sounded like a groggy sleep-filled reply, and that he couldn't hear the quaver in my voice.

I have always been able to wake up quickly and whenever I need to. I suppose it's a function of my Bureau days when long, boring stretches quickly turned into potentially life-threatening moments. Before I had surrendered to sleep, I had worked out a plan. I had silently gotten out of bed when I heard Jeff's soft snoring. Then I had quickly assembled a sweat suit, socks and running shoes, depositing them under the bed. I fully intended to follow Jeff on his run and confront the woman who was trying to steal my husband. Oh, I'd wait until Jeff had left her, because I wanted her all to myself.

While Jeff was showering the next morning, I quickly dressed, hiding my nightgown under the bed and covering myself up so it would look like I was still asleep. I normally didn't get up until Jeff had come back from his morning run.

I waited, feigning sleep, until I heard the front door gently close. I jumped up and went to the front window, noting the direction of Jeff's run. Then I slipped out of the house, following at a discreet distance. Old skills of tailing suspects came back to me as if I were still an agent in the field. It wasn't hard to follow him. I had been a little afraid that Jeff would be able to outdistance me with my now-shorter legs and weaker body. But my female body was actually in pretty good shape, and Jeff's pace was not as fast as I had feared.

I did have to leave him a wider lead than I would have liked. The problem is that there is no way to run silently, and with almost no traffic and even fewer pedestrians about, every noise and every motion would be noticeable if Jeff looked the right way. I didn't have to follow him far. I had the cover of a large fir tree as I watched him run up the walk to a house only three blocks from our own. How convenient, I thought grimly. His girlfriend lived close enough that it really didn't take much effort for him to see her.

I gasped when the door opened. At first, I thought it was Callie. Then I remembered there was only a one in nine chance that it was my co-worker and friend. It could have been any of the Muses. Well, I'd find out which one soon. To my relief, they didn't kiss at the door, but she quickly dragged him in by the arm, looking both ways to make certain they weren't seen. Well tough luck, honey, I thought with satisfaction. You've been made.

But which of the Muses was it? I wondered. I had liked all of the ones I had met, and I hoped it was none of them. I wouldn't know who it was until I confronted her.

If I had been smart, I would have kept my distance. Any normal person might have done just that. But I was wrapped up in the chase. It was almost like being back at the Bureau. There, I would have had listening devices to aid me, but here I had only stealth to depend upon. Morbid curiosity got the best of me. I sneaked up to the house to see what was going on.

In the movies, I would have sneaked up and peered in the window. That works okay at night, but in daylight, it is much easier to see out than in, and I didn't want to be spotted. Instead, I made my way around to the rear of the house. The house itself was modest and perhaps thirty years old. There was a patio in back, and as I had hoped, it was open to let in the cool morning air before air conditioning was necessary to shut out the heat of an Oklahoma summer. The patio door screen was unlocked, and I gently slid it back just enough to allow me to enter.

To my relief, there were no sounds of passion coming from the

bedrooms of the modest ranch-style house. Instead, what sounded like an argument was going on loudly in the living room.

“You were supposed to be getting a job at Vulman Industries,” the voice of the Muse practically yelled. “It was all set. My sister would have made sure you met Eric Vulman and would have vouched for you.”

“Your sister isn’t a part of this,” Jeff yelled back. “That would be letting one more person know what we were doing—a person who might not agree with your plans, I might add. Besides, Vulman Industries isn’t important.”

“But the fuel pump...”

“The pump isn’t important,” Jeff broke in. “Is that what you think—that it’s about the fuel pump?”

“But that’s what is giving them the power,” the Muse argued.

“Power, no,” Jeff argued. “Money, yes. Don’t you see? The pump is just another piece of the puzzle, but it isn’t the answer. I need to explain this to your superior.”

“My superior talks to no one but me,” the Muse insisted.

“Then why did you bother to insert me into this madhouse?” Jeff growled. “There were other agents you could have used.”

I was almost lightheaded with shock as I heard Jeff speak. I had been prepared to find him in the arms of another woman. I had rehearsed in my mind all the things I would say to his lover—and later to him. But I had never suspected for a moment what I was hearing now: Jeff remembered being Andre!

What had I gotten myself into? I had been so concerned about other things—first adapting to my new life and then rescuing my new life from the clutches of an unidentified paramour. I had never for a second suspected that Andre’s personality and memories were unchanged.

It had been easy for him, I thought grimly. While I had to negotiate everything from makeup and women’s fashions to sitting on the toilet

to pee, Andre had had to do very little to fit in as Jeff. In some ways, now that I thought about it, Jeff was very much like the Andre I remembered from those halcyon days when he had been married to Barbara. For him, this had been acting out his younger life. Hell, I even looked a little like Barbara. Tears of frustration welled up as I realized how badly I had been used.

But who was he working for? It was time for me to put away my jealous wife persona and even try to suppress my rage over how Andre had tricked me. But my God, how he must have laughed as he bedded me, knowing that he was making love to the brother of his wife. No, there was no time for anger about that. It would have to come later. But it was so hard to hold it back. New hormones and alien logic coursed through my body and mind. I had to remember Baxter Blaine, FBI Agent. I had to remember what he would do and how he would think.

I tried to focus on the conversation. Jeff—or Andre—and the Muse continued to argue. I was almost proud of him for holding his ground. He was arguing with what had to be considered a minor goddess, and yet he remained firm. I was beginning to understand some of the qualities that had made the Greek such a valued agent. He had the rare talent of keeping his masters in line.

“Enough!” another voice—a woman’s voice—interjected with authority. In the silence that ensued, I had to hold back a gasp. I recognized the new voice as well. And to make matters worse, her voice was coming from behind me. I felt a hand on my shoulder, gripping it tightly. “Shall we go in the living room and join the others?” Minnie Musgrave asked sweetly.

“Julie!” Jeff gasped as I was led into the living room. I had no choice. From the grip on my shoulder, I knew that Minnie Musgrave was stronger and quicker than I was. She was after all, a goddess. No, I realized, that wasn’t quite right. There had been another word to describe Mnemosyne in the text I had read—Titan. I vaguely seemed to recall that the gods we knew from Greek and Roman myths were descendants of the Titans. Somehow, that designation sounded

almost as bad as a goddess.

Jeff rushed over to me and grabbed my hand. "Julie, what are you doing here? Are you all right?"

"I'm not Julie," I growled at him. "And you're not Jeff."

His face fell. "So you know..."

Minnie laughed, "So you couldn't even keep your hidden identity from this little thing. Some master spy you turned out to be—to be discovered by such a confused little girl."

I felt my face redden at her insult.

"I had more important things to do," Jeff countered calmly. "I was brought here to uncover in a few days what you weren't able to uncover in years."

It was Minnie's turn to redden, only hers was at least in part suppressed anger. She quickly decided to change the subject. "You wanted to see me. So here I am. Now, tell me what we need to know. What is our sanctimonious so-called King of the Gods planning?"

To my surprise, Jeff smiled. "I'm afraid I don't have a clue. And to be honest, I wouldn't tell you if I did."

Minnie and the Muse looked confused at first, and when they at last realized what Jeff's statement foretold, their confusion turned to shocked awareness.

"That's right," the voice of the Judge floated out of the very air. "He doesn't know. But I'd say he accomplished his mission quite well in spite of that, wouldn't you?"

The living room was suddenly very crowded. From out of nowhere, Officer Mercer was suddenly there, as if he had appeared in less than an instant. I could feel a sudden gust of wind as the air he displaced moved about the room. His gun was still holstered, but his right arm was extended, palm up, and aimed at the Muse and Minnie as if it were a weapon. I was pretty sure that in some way that defied understanding, that was exactly what it was.

The air in front of the fireplace began to shimmer and take on the outline of a man. In a matter of moments, the Judge stood before us. He still had a commanding presence even without his judicial robe. He was wearing a suit that I suspected cost about what I made a week as an FBI Agent. His hands were clasped behind his back, and just for a moment, I realized how much he looked like Admiral Nepper that day I had met him.

Minnie and her Muse daughter both frowned and drew closer together, almost as if they feared what the Judge might do to them. Apparently even the minor deities weren't immune to the strange justice meted out in Ovid.

"You've done an excellent job, my boy," the Judge commended Jeff, patting him on the back. "You are everything I was told you would be. I can see that my brother was correct in choosing you for this role. Congratulations."

"Thank you, sir," Jeff said with a self-conscious glance at me.

Now I was really confused. I was beginning to realize I was the only person in the room who didn't know what was going on. I must have looked completely mystified, for the Judge looked at me and said, "Don't worry, Julie. I'll explain this to you shortly."

"What should I do with these two?" Officer Mercer asked.

"I think our librarian should join the rest of her kind, don't you?"

Officer Mercer nodded in agreement. "And what about Merry?"

"Take her to my office," the Judge commanded. "As my daughter, she is my personal responsibility. I'll see to it shortly."

"You think you've won, don't you?" Minnie sneered.

"My dear," the Judge sighed, "it would be unwise of you to presume upon our previous relationship with false bravado. Winning and losing are concepts for beings less developed than ourselves. All I have done is solve a very small problem that threatened a much larger objective." He motioned them away with a wave of his hand. Officer Mercer led the fuming woman out of the house to an awaiting police

car which I was sure hadn't been there moments before.

It was my turn now. "You bastard," I growled at Jeff. "You knew who you had been all along."

Jeff actually cowered a little. "But you knew who you were, too," he pointed out.

"Yes, but I thought you were... I mean I didn't realize you knew you had been someone else before. You had to know that I knew who I had been."

"I'm afraid you'll have to delay this charming little domestic quarrel until I have left," the Judge interjected. "Julie, I want to take a moment to explain to you that what Jeff did he did on my direct orders. I made certain he would come to the attention of our... opponents. We made sure you and Andre would both be at the rendezvous point before the local contact. In fact, the local contact nearly decided not to contact Andre after his transformation, but fortunately she decided to take the risk. Andre was most cooperative and followed my orders to the letter. That included keeping his identity a secret from you. I'm sure you realize that that means he had no choice in the matter."

That did put a little different light on the matter. Defying the Judge was not a wise idea, as I was certain both Merry the Muse and Minnie the Muse's mother were about to find out. "All right," I agreed, calming down—just a little. "Then please tell me what was going on here."

The Judge sat down on the arm of a couch and began, "Not long ago, we put down a... disturbance started by our Titan friends and their associates. Are you familiar with the Titans?"

"Vaguely," I replied.

"They roamed the earth and the heavens before my brothers and sisters established a more benign order," the Judge explained. "They thrive on chaos and declare it to be the natural order of things. When we put down their latest attempt to interfere in our plans, there were a few loose ends..."

"Loose ends?" I asked.

He nodded. "That's right. There were agents of the Titans still in place but unknown to us. One of them appeared to be getting closer than we wished to the purpose of Ovid. That purpose is our most closely-guarded secret. We knew information was leaking out, but not how. Then we became aware that there were sleepers among us. They had been planted here from the beginning, posing as loyal supporters of our cause.

"As much damage as they caused, they were in need of help. They had gotten as far as they could without exposing themselves. They were somewhat limited in their talents, not used to modern methods of espionage. They decided the best course of action would be to bring in a professional unknown to any of us to help with their cause. They chose your nemesis—Andre—for their mission."

"But Andre—Jeff—was working for you as an agent provocateur," I surmised.

The Judge smiled. "Very good. Yes, that is the term. He was to show sympathy for their cause and lead them to believe that he had uncovered our actual plan here in Ovid. He needed to be convincing, and he most certainly achieved that, don't you think?"

Jeff gave me a weak smile which I returned with a pitiless frown.

"Yes," I begrudgingly admitted. "He did achieve that."

I turned back to the Judge. "You don't have any power over us unless we're about to die, do you?"

The Judge didn't answer, but continued to smile at me.

"So you—or specifically, another one of you," I said, thinking of the Admiral, "enticed me to kill Andre for you."

"Our Titan friends were too clumsy," the Judge admitted. "We were afraid they would bungle the job. They were informed through their own agents in your FBI that you had been set loose on Andre. You were a logical choice. Your own life would have ended at that warehouse in Baton Rouge, and your hatred of Andre would spur you to do what we needed done."

I was fuming. I hated being used. “But you knew Minnie was one of the Titans. Why go through all of this just to confirm the obvious?”

“That is the key word—confirm,” the Judge explained. “Not all Titans are bad, and not all of us are good—assuming you accept that we are not evil to begin with. Of course we suspected her, but we had no proof. She had been very careful not to be directly involved in any of the activities. But Jeff’s supposed revelations on our plans were just too tempting for her. When she showed herself here today, that was all the proof we needed.

“Now, if you will excuse me, I have a wayward daughter to discipline. I encourage the two of you to work out your problems.”

His form began to waver and become as transparent as that of the shades. “Wait!” I called out. “I’m curious. Which of the Muses betrayed you here today?”

Only a voice remained of the Judge, but I could hear in it amusement. “Isn’t that obvious, my dear?” he said. “Who else could it be but Mepomene?”

Of course. Merry was Mepomene—the Muse of Tragedy.

“Uh... Julie...”

I turned back to face Jeff, my arms carefully folded over my breasts. “What?”

“I want to explain some things to you,” he said softly. “I know you feel I’ve betrayed you...”

“That seems to be the story of our lives, doesn’t it, Andre?”

He shook his head. “I’m not Andre. And you’re not Baxter. You’ve changed—don’t deny it. Ovid does that to people. We aren’t who we used to be.”

“But I still remember who we were,” I pointed out with a note of sadness. “In some ways, I wish we didn’t. Maybe the lucky ones in Ovid are the ones who are permitted to forget.”

“I don’t think so,” Jeff countered. “Sit down and we can talk about

this.”

He motioned for me to sit next to him on the couch, but I chose a chair instead. There was no way I was going to sit close enough for him to touch me. I didn’t want him to touch me ever again.

“I need to tell you why I agreed to do all of this,” he began.

“The answer is obvious,” I snapped. “It was the money. That’s all you’ve cared about since Barbara’s death, isn’t it?”

“No, Julie...”

“Don’t call me that.”

“All right. But it wasn’t the money. Did you know I had over five million dollars in investments when I was asked to take this assignment? To come here to Ovid, I had to give it up—all of it!”

I didn’t know what to say, so I remained quiet.

“I was approached by the Judge’s enemies first. They offered me two million for this job alone. Before I could give them an answer, I was contacted by Admiral Nepper. His agents knew what I had been offered, so he made me a better offer.”

“Better than two million?” I asked. “But I thought you said you didn’t do this for the money.”

“I didn’t,” he confirmed. “Admiral Nepper didn’t offer me money. He offered me Barbara.”

“What? But Barbara’s dead,” I protested. “Surely not even the Judge can bring someone back to life?”

“Not exactly,” he agreed. “But the magic of Ovid changes reality. You and I—and all the other real people in Ovid—we never existed in any other form when reality gets changed. So all the things we did in our lives just never happened. You and I never met at Georgetown. I never met Barbara, and so...”

“She never died,” I said quietly. My God. My sister was alive! Well, she wasn’t my sister, I supposed, but that didn’t matter. I was never going

to see her again in this world anyhow. Just knowing that she was alive...

"But if you never met Barbara..."

"Then she isn't my wife," he finished for me. "She's married. The Judge at least allowed me to know what became of her life. She went to Georgetown and went into law. While practicing in New York, she met an investment banker her age. They're married now and have been for almost as long as we would have been if she had lived." Jeff managed a wistful smile. "They have two children—a boy and a girl. I've seen their pictures. They're a very attractive and a very happy family."

"You did this... all of this... for Barbara?" I asked slowly. There was a quaver in my voice. I think until that moment, I had never realized how much Andre missed Barbara. I cursed myself. For all of those wasted years, I thought Andre was a careless lout who had caused the death of my sister. It was only now that I realized I had not been the only one to die inside when Barbara was killed.

"But why all the years as an agent for hire?" I asked. "Why didn't you explain?"

"Don't you think I tried?" Jeff asked in frustration. "Think about Norman Allison in the Bureau. He's built his career on the mangled bodies of other agents like you. We had men like him in the CIA, too. Someone had to take the fall for the botched assignment that got Barbara killed. My career was over the minute I threatened to take them down."

"But Allison was the FBI liaison on that assignment."

"Of course he was," Jeff agreed. "That's why he helped to destroy your career. If you were allowed to pursue me, you might find out the truth. They prospered, Jul... They prospered while we died a little each day."

I was silent. Had I really wasted my life so needlessly? My hatred for Andre was misplaced. I should have hated others and pitied Andre. How men like Norman Allison must have laughed at me—running

around the country in pursuit of the man I had the most in common with. I felt tears in my eyes, but were they tears of frustration or just tears of joy that in spite of all my bungling, Barbara was still alive.

"You look a little like her, you know."

My head jerked up at Jeff. "Who?"

He smiled. "Barbara. You have her eyes and her coloring. There were actually times over the last few days that I nearly called you by her name. You two always were a lot alike."

"I suppose we were," I said quietly.

"Julie..."

I didn't stop him for calling me by that name this time.

"...I love you."

The words reverberated inside my head. My mind tasted them, savoring them like a delicious morsel that had never been experienced before.

"I..." I began. I tripped on the word. I. Who was I? I was... I was... "I... love you..."

And I knew in the instant that the words left my mouth that it was true. Our lives were intertwined, but not as they had been in the past. As I dived for the couch to bury myself in Jeff's waiting arms, I knew that Andre and Baxter were just convenient terms for two old enemies who had never really existed. Jeff and Julie were the proper names for lovers.

"So the Others haven't given up yet," Susan concluded as my trance faded away.

Diana shook her head. "No, and I doubt if they ever will. They're actually as powerful as we are in their own way. And they have potential allies as well. Imagine what would happen, for example, if your government learned of our existence."

I leaned over to look Diana in the face. "Look, Di, we might all be able to help more if we knew what was going on. Why can't you trust us? Let us know what we can do to help."

"Be yourselves," she replied cryptically.

"Be ourselves?" I asked. I felt as if I was in an old *Babylon Five* episode trying to make sense of the pronouncements of the Vorlons. "What do you mean by that?"

Diana was silent for a moment before answering. At last she said, "It's up to the Judge to tell you whatever he will. There are even things the rest of us don't know. But I can tell you this. He has determined that something terrible is just over the horizon and he has a plan to prevent it from happening. The Others want to prevent him from doing that. It isn't that they're evil or anything. Rather, they just think events should be allowed to unfold without interference from us. Or maybe I should say most of them aren't evil."

"What terrible thing is coming?" Susan asked hesitantly, as if she wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer.

"I can't say," Diana replied. "In fact, I don't really know. But don't worry. There's plenty of time to prevent it. We just have to make sure the Others don't derail our plans."

With that she got to her feet. "And now, on a lighter note, I have a little treat for you."

As if on cue, two girls I recognized as a couple of the Muses appeared at the patio door. I wasn't sure which ones they were, but I knew neither was Merry. The Judge had been mum about his punishment of Merry, but I was certain she wouldn't be standing at my patio door with the broad smile both of these girls had.

"We've decided to give you two a break," Diana announced. "We're going to take your kids with us and give you two the afternoon off."

"But I have school shopping to do," I protested.

"We'll handle it," Diana assured me as the Muses roused the kids for an excursion. "Besides, the kids like going out with Aunt Diana, don't

you?”

“Yeah!” the twins cheered as they entered the room. No matter what guise Diana chose, the twins always seemed to recognize her and saw nothing strange about her. I think Diana liked it that way.

In moment, they had all left together, taking the babies as well leaving Susan and me alone.

“So what are we going to do?” Susan asked.

Without any hesitation, I told her, “Well, for starters, change out of that outfit. You can borrow a top and some shorts from me. You’re a little smaller than me up top, but I think I can find something that works. While you change, I’ll get the beer and some pretzels.”

“You mean...?” she began with a happy smile.

I grinned. “Yeah. The Oklahoma game’s on TV. If you hurry, I think we can make the kickoff. Who says just because we’re girls we can’t enjoy football?”

Ovid XIV: The Band

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Every now and then, I wonder. I wonder if the gods I work for and with are really gods or something else. I wonder why they created Ovid. I wonder why they transform some people into other people and follow their new lives very closely while others they seem to forget before their victims ever stagger out of the courtroom. I wonder what they know of the future that we mortals can only guess at. But most of all, I wonder: why me? Why was I chosen to be the assistant to The Judge, better known to those outside Ovid as the god Jupiter?

The problem with wondering about all of that is that most of the time, I'm too busy doing the job I'm paid for or looking after my family, so I don't have time to wonder often. I don't really regret that, though. Being a woman has turned out to be more rewarding than I would have ever dreamed if I hadn't been transformed into one.

"You look deep in thought."

I looked up from my desk at the smiling face of Susan Jager, my best friend in Ovid. "Sorry," I said. "I was just wondering."

"About Ovid?"

"Of course." It was a frequent discussion between the two of us. We probably knew more about Ovid and its gods than any other mortals, and yet we knew very little. Most of it didn't bother us much since, as I said, we had the more mundane tasks of job and family to contend with. Still, we often discussed it, primarily because there was one facet of the gods that concerned us—namely, their preoccupation with our children.

Both Susan and I had noticed how the gods treated her new son and my new daughter as if they were very important. We doubted if it was just because of our relationship with the gods. Even The Judge—a being who seemed to have little patience with children—seemed

enraptured by our children. Both Susan and I were beginning to suspect that the fact that they were both born within hours of each other was deeper than just a coincidence.

“Hello ladies!”

The voice and appearance changed often, but we always knew Diana from her cheerful greetings. Today, she had a very Mediterranean appearance, with olive skin, aquiline nose, and coal black hair. Given the origin of legends of the gods, I suspected this lovely but somewhat earthy version of Diana was close to her original appearance—assuming of course that the gods really had a human appearance at all.

She was dressed in her usual sexy attire, albeit professional. Like Susan and me, she wore a business suit, but unlike our conservative gray suits, hers was a bright lemon yellow, and unlike the ‘sensible’ two-inch heels we wore, she sported matching yellow pumps with a full four-inch heel.

“Got time to update me on the Pearsons?” she asked. I wasn’t surprised. It wasn’t often we got celebrities in Ovid, although I was young enough that I didn’t really consider them such. They were just another washed-up band relegated to the ‘Golden Oldies’ on rock stations around the country. I suppose when you’ve lived as long as the gods have, the band was as new as this morning.

“Sure,” I replied. “How about you Susan?”

“Well, I was there for quite a bit of it, but sure, why not?”

“No time like the present,” I shrugged as I fell into my trance...

Nobody had to tell me what Hell was all about—I was already there. Hell was cruising down a two-lane Oklahoma highway on the hottest Indian Summer day in fifty years (or so the locals were sure to tell us) driving a rundown Plymouth van with an air conditioner that didn’t work worth shit. Oh, and just to make it even more hellish, let’s add a radio that keeps shorting out, a cloud of cigarette smoke, and the

company of my three best friends who I had come to hate with all my might.

“Turn that up!” Gordy called from the back seat. “That’s ‘*What a Face*’.”

“I know it’s ‘*What a Face*’,” Boop growled in her husky voice. “You think I don’t recognize my own voice?”

I suppose I could have pointed out that her voice had changed quite a bit since we had made that recording. Of course, it was so old it had been originally on vinyl. God, Boop had a voice in those days. No wonder we were able to pack them in on the *What a Face* Tour. Now though, she made Stevie Nicks sound like a soprano. No wonder we were stuck with gigs in places like East Bumfuck, Oklahoma.

“So turn it up!” Gordy insisted, hitting the back of her seat. Shit. I wished he wouldn’t do that. The fucking van was held together with superglue as it was. Besides, if Gordy hurt his hand on the back of the seat, we’d be short a bass guitarist for our evening performance. Things were tight enough for us as it was without losing this gig. I mean, it was a shitty gig, but it was the only gig we had.

Boop snorted but she turned up the radio. Actually, I was glad she did. The riff just coming up was one of the best ones I ever did. Jeez, I could play guitar in those days, I thought to myself. I could still outplay a lot of the new kids coming up, but not like I played in ’78.

“I figure we’re about an hour out of Muskogee,” I announced from behind the wheel as the song faded away. “You’d better wake up Jess.”

“You figure?” Gordy asked, making no move to wake Jess. Boop snorted again and lit another one of her fucking lung wasters. “You mean you don’t know?”

“This road should get us there,” I said, faking confidence.

“Jeez, Grant, you’re a typical male,” Boop observed. “Wouldn’t check a fucking map or ask for directions if your life depended on it.”

“If you remember, Jess threw the map out an hour ago,” I snapped.

Yeah, Jess was high on something. I didn't have any idea what it was. He had more pills than a fucking Walgreen's. I don't think even Jess knew what he had taken—assuming he was even the slightest bit lucid. Jess had a bad habit of copping pills from fans without knowing what they were. It was no small miracle that he hadn't managed to fry his brain. Maybe he had. Nothing Jess had said or done for the last few years had made any sense.

But God, could he play the drums! I had seen him so cooked he could barely sit up in his chair, but when the stage lights came on, it was as if someone had tripped a switch on him as well. He didn't just play the drums; he became the drums, beating out a rhythm that would have made a deaf man start tapping his feet. Of course, everything he played he had been playing for twenty years. We didn't play anything new.

"Fuckin' A," Jess mumbled at the sound of his name. It was his favorite expression and he mumbled it a lot.

"Will he be okay for tonight's gig?" I asked Gordy.

Gordy was about the most normal member of the band. Tall, lanky, his thinning blonde hair still as long as it was twenty years earlier, he always took care of Jess, sort of like a big brother. Sure, he smoked, drank and partied like the rest of us, but with Gordy, it seemed sometimes as if he did it just to be part of the group. I suppose we were his family in a way. An only child, he had lost his parents while we were all in college together, so in a way, we were the only family he had—and so Jess ended up being treated like his little brother in spite of the fact that he was really two years older than Gordy.

"He'll be okay," Gordy said confidently, exhaling a cloud of cigarette smoke in my direction as he spoke.

That was all I needed to hear. Gordy would walk Jess around, throw water in his face, slap him silly or do whatever else was needed to get Jess ready to play. Gordy was a good older brother—or I thought he was. I had never had any siblings so I couldn't tell. I had been raised by an alcoholic mother who had been deserted by an alcoholic father

right after I was born. She was gone now and I didn't miss her. Come to think of it, I didn't miss anybody.

I opened my window to let in the warm Oklahoma air.

"What the fuck did you do that for?" Boop asked crossly.

"Because when you and Gordy both have a cigarette going, the air conditioner can't clear the air quickly enough," I explained more calmly than I felt. "My eyes were stinging."

"Nothing worse than an ex-smoker," Boop mumbled as she scooted down in her seat. At least she didn't say anything. I gave a quick sidelong glance at Boop. Jeez, she was nice looking in spite of approaching forty-five. Oh, her skin had that sallow look a lot of smokers get, but her breasts were still high and firm inside her black halter top. And her waist was slim and trim, encased in designer jeans.

She fussed with her short dark hair, and as I looked at it, I could see that she needed to touch it up. Gray was peeking through here and there, and nobody expects to see a sexy-at-middle-age rock singer with gray hair. She had kept it short all of her adult life, and that had become a trademark and partially accounted for her unfortunate nickname. Her real name was Elizabeth McCarthy and her parents called her Betty. Then right after our first gig in college, Jess had looked her over in her short flapper-style dress and short hair and announced that she looked like a Betty all right—Betty Boop. By the time we were well known, the trades picked up on the nickname and she had been stuck with it ever since.

Looking at Boop always made me a little sad. I'd always start thinking about what might have been. Back when the band got started—before anyone had ever heard of *Interossiter*—she and I had been close—real close. But while she really did it for me, apparently I didn't do it for her. She found other interests and I didn't fit in. Now we just had two things in common—the band and the fact that we both liked girls.

"We're gonna miss the gig," Boop mumbled.

“We won’t miss it,” I assured her. “There’s a town up ahead. I’ll stop and you can ask for directions.”

“Why me?” Boop asked.

I gave her the patented Grant Douglas grin—the grin that had led a steady procession of girls to my bed and the grin that always annoyed Boop. “Because men don’t ask for directions, remember?”

Gordy snickered—which pissed Boop off even more.

Usually, we weren’t quite so tough on each other, but our experience just a few hours before had jangled us enough that the unspoken truce we had observed for the past couple of days had broken down. I suppose anyone nearly encountering a tornado on the Oklahoma plains would have been pretty jangled even if they weren’t in our band. We all thought we’d bought the farm. The huge funnel was so close to us that the roar of the storm caused our van to vibrate. We had pulled over to the side of the road to avoid damage from the hail that accompanied the storm. The funnel caught us completely by surprise. Fortunately, at the last minute it pulled back up into the sky and veered away from us, but it had left us all pretty shaken.

Who would have thought, I mused as we came closer to the unknown town, that we would end up like this? Back at Arizona State, we had been close—real close. All of us were in the same dorm together as freshmen. At first, we were just casual acquaintances, eating and sharing stories about our classmates and our professors. But as we got to know each other better, we found that we had one big thing in common—music.

Gordy and I had both been in bands in our respective high schools. Boop—and she was just Betty back then—was a small town girl with a voice that had gotten her the lead in all the high school musicals. Jess was already a pro, sitting in as a drummer in three or four recording sessions back home in San Diego. One thing led to another, and by the second semester of our freshman year, *Interossiter* had formed.

The band name had been Gordy’s idea. Even back in the late seventies, naming a band was a little like naming a racehorse. You

needed to find a name no one else had used (at least popularly) and one that would be remembered by your fans. Gordy came up with the name. He was a big science fiction fan, and the name cropped up in the movie *This Island Earth*. An *Interossiter* was a device used by an alien race to communicate. It had a screen like an inverted triangle, so that became our logo.

We stayed around campus the summer after our freshman year, sweating through the ungodly Arizona summer but honing our act. We were good—very good. We got plenty of gigs but nothing really big. Mostly, we played small, loud clubs where we did our versions of songs made popular by the Beatles, the Stones, and the Doors. You might say we were early retro.

Then as our sophomore year began, two things happened. First, I met a girl I really liked. She started showing up at all of our gigs. She was cute and blonde, and her eyes danced to the rhythm of our music. Whenever I looked down at her, she seemed to inspire me to play better. Her name was Eunice. It's funny, but I couldn't think of her last name, and the more I thought about it, I wasn't sure if I ever did know it. Maybe it was because she had such an unusual, old-fashioned first name. In any case, we saw a lot of each other that semester.

The other thing that happened is that my music caught fire. No, I don't just mean the way I played. Like all musicians, I tried my best to compose as well as play, but I had limited talents when it came to writing original music. Everything I wrote seemed trite. Even when the other members of the band heard my works, they'd tell me it was good and then tell me what other song it sounded like.

Then came *What a Face*. I know; it's a stupid name for a song. One music critic later said "Grant Douglas should get a pie in the face for making us listen to *What a Face*." But he was in a very small minority. To make a long story short, we got noticed—big time. One day we're playing little clubs in Tempe and the next day we're on the front page of Billboard. MCA signed us, and *Interossiter* was big stuff.

To be honest, all the songs on our first album, titled simply *Interossiter*, were inspired by Eunice. When I was with her, my

creative juices just tended to flow. Tunes rolled through my head, echoing within my mind, demanding to be written down. And the words... they weren't just lyrics; they were poetry. Even people who hated rock music clamored to get copies of the lyrics. They appeared in poetry collections and slick paper magazines along with the works of prize-winning poets.

We dropped out of school right after our first album came out. There was really no other choice. After all, MCA wanted us on the tour. The 1979 *What a Face* Tour drew as many people as ELO's *Out of the Blue* Tour. No college degree was going to make us rich like the tour would. The only thing I regretted was that Eunice and I broke up, but riches called.

And we were rich—for a little while. More money was coming in than any of us—or all of us for that matter—had ever seen in our lives. There was plenty of money for palatial houses, magnificent cars, women, and every electronic toy known to mankind. Fans bought our first album in droves; the store couldn't keep the album in stock. We were on the cover of magazines. Product endorsements rolled in. Life was good.

Someone once said that all good things must come to an end. I suppose we all knew that deep in our hearts, but none of us realized how quickly it could come to an end. In the recording business, it's called sophomore slump. It refers to a second album that doesn't measure up to the first. Ours wasn't just a slump; it was an out-of-control nosedive.

This is how it happened. Eunice and I had broken up the minute the big checks started coming in. After all, what did I need with one cute little blonde when thousands were pleading with me by mail, phone and in person to have my baby? And as I realized all too late, Eunice was my inspiration. All I had to do was hold her hand and the music began to play. Now, my hand was empty and there was only silence.

But that didn't stop me. Our fans were waiting for our next album. It came out in 1981 and to be kind, it was trash. I think we all knew it when we made it, but we thought *Interossiter* on the album cover

would be enough to carry the day. But it wasn't.

What followed were years of trying to climb back on that pinnacle we had once achieved. But it wasn't to be. The second tour was cancelled after dismal results in three cities. Plans for a third album were scrapped. The phone stopped ringing.

No matter though, we thought we'd take our winnings and retire. So after five mediocre years of trying to create another *What a Face*, the band broke up. Well, most of it broke up. Boop (and she was now and forever known as Boop) and I had become an item. But even that didn't last long. As I said before, we found that we really only had two things in common—our music and the fact that we both liked girls.

I looked over at Boop and tried to remember the good times we had together before she decided to take men off her diet. We had been hell in bed together, but that wasn't enough for either of us in the long run. To be honest, I started cheating on her, seeing other girls. Imagine my surprise when I came back to the place we shared and found out she was seeing other girls, too.

Then five long years ago, fate threw us back together. No, I take that back. It wasn't fate; it was poverty. Here's what happened. First of all, none of us knew squat about investing our money. Here we were, rich by most people's standards, and it looked for a while as if *Interossiter* was going to earn more money every year than some third world nations. Of course, that was before our second album bombed. Anyhow, like a lot of bands, we found ourselves a business manager to invest our earnings for us. Unfortunately, also like a lot of bands, our business manager turned out to be a crook. By the time we all realized what had happened, there were no bills left on the money tree and *Interossiter* was washed up.

Still, we all had some assets left. After all, houses and cars and other fancy toys can be liquidated for cash. So each of us went our separate ways—usually after loudly telling each of the others to screw themselves. We cashed out and tried to get on with our lives. Unfortunately, none of us had ever gotten around to getting a college degree or learning a trade, and it seemed there wasn't much call for

washed-up rock stars in the corporate world any more than there was a call for them in the entertainment world.

I swallowed my pride first. I went back to singing and accompanying myself in small, smoky clubs. One by one, I got back in touch with the others and found out that their lives outside of music sucked as badly as mine did. Boop was waiting tables, Gordy was working as a disk jockey doing dance parties and the like, and Jess... Well, let's just say that Jess had burned out so much of his brain that he wasn't much good for anything except day labor. He was one of those guys who hang around the loading dock looking for enough manual work to get money for food and drugs.

Fortunately, there were enough aging Baby Boomers out there who remembered *Interossiter* that we could get gigs. And as shitty as our collective lifestyle was, we were all better off than we had been on our own. That was why we stayed together in spite of the fact that we didn't really like each other anymore. We needed each other. There it was—in spite of the fact that we were all in hell, it was a more comfortable circle of the underworld than we would have been in on our own.

"Okay," Boop said reading the roadside signs. "So where the hell is Ovid?"

"How should I know?" I growled. "Do I look like an Okie?"

She gave me a withering stare. "No, you look like an asshole."

Gordy broke into his irritating laugh; I swear the guy sounded like a little girl giggling.

"Oklahoma..." Jess muttered. "We're in Oklahoma."

Well, there it was. Jess had made his one halfway lucid statement of the day.

"It doesn't look very big," Boop observed.

I really couldn't reply to that. I was too busy driving to look around. All I could see was that the two-lane road ahead of me seemed to wind over a small hill then turn somewhat to the right where the usual

collection of roadside businesses began. I had to admit that Boop was probably right. The town didn't appear very big. But then again, many of the small farm towns in the Midwest didn't appear very large. They were slowly dying as the farm economy they depended upon took less and less people. Besides, most of the younger residents could hardly wait to get out of the little burghs in the Farm Belt. They longed for the bright lights and good times of the cities, and I couldn't say that I blamed them.

In our journeys from one gig to another, I had seen countless small towns. Mostly, we were just passing through. We hadn't sunk so low as to take gigs playing at high school proms and summer park concerts, so the only reason we ever stopped in small towns was to get a bite to eat or ask for directions. Ovid would hopefully be large enough to provide us with both.

As we actually entered the town, I began to note something about Ovid that few other small towns enjoyed. There was an... orderliness to it. That's the only way I can think of to put it. Ovid was clean and polished, like the back lot of a movie studio. Business buildings were neat and well-maintained. Trees and lawns looked neat and well-cared for. Even the streets looked as if they had been recently maintained, their blacktop and concrete surfaces striped and free of the usual cracks and potholes that seem to plague all towns regardless of size.

Boop was apparently thinking the same thing. "What is this, the governor's home town? Since when do small towns look this prosperous?"

I grunted in agreement.

"I wonder if they have a Mickey D's," Gordy mused.

My stomach did a flip-flop just thinking about that. It was a running war between Gordy and me. He liked the fast food joints while I always tried to find a good little local place with a broader menu and a slice of homemade pie.

"Food," Jess agreed, or at least I think he was agreeing.

“Directions first,” Boop demanded, pointing. “There’s a convenience store. Ask them for directions.”

“You ask,” I muttered, pulling in to the gas island in front of the store.

“Jeez, you’re serious about not wanting to ask for directions, aren’t you?”

“It’s not that,” I replied. “I need gas. I can be filling up while you ask.”

“Fine!” she snapped, opening the door the instant I stopped. I smiled as she stormed away. The fact of the matter is that I really didn’t like to ask for directions—she was right. Actually, I still had better than half a tank, plenty of gas to get us to Muskogee. Or at least I thought it was.

“I can use some more cigarettes anyway,” she called back, knowing how much her smoking bothered me.

The heat of a warm but fairly dry afternoon hit me as I got out to fill up the car. I normally hated the Midwest for the summer heat and humidity, but the temperature in Ovid didn’t seem too bad. Of course, it really wasn’t officially summer any more. But I knew from personal experience that just because it wasn’t officially summer didn’t mean much in this part of the country. That tornado we had spotted that very morning was proof of that.

Boop strode back to the car, an angry look on her face. Before I could ask her why, she told me, her arms folded over her breasts. “Can you believe it? They didn’t have any cigarettes.”

“All out?” I asked, surprised. The place wasn’t a name brand convenience store like Seven Eleven, but I couldn’t imagine that anyone would run the store so inefficiently that they would be out of one of their highest profit items.

“They don’t carry them,” she said to my surprise. “It turns out smoking is against some city ordinance.”

“Well, probably just in restaurants,” I offered, but she shook her head.

“No, the whole damned town doesn’t allow smoking.”

If she had said that booze was outlawed, I would have understood. This was, after all, the Bible Belt and there were still a lot of dry towns and counties. But cigarettes? Jeez, if the Californians ever heard of this place, they'd make it an honorary California town, I thought.

"Well, they're not going to stop me," she muttered, pulling a mostly-empty pack of smokes out of the car.

"Shit!" I screamed at her. "Don't light that! Can't you smell the gas fumes?"

She graced me with a particularly nasty frown, but she didn't try to light up.

Changing the subject, I asked her, "So did you get directions?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of?"

She motioned with her head at the young clerk behind the counter.

"The fucking brain dead monkey in there was sort of vague. He acted like he'd never been out of the county—whatever county this is. He said something about taking the road out of town and keep on it until we reached the main highway."

"Which direction?" I prompted. "And which highway?"

"He wasn't sure."

"That was a lot of help then."

Now her hands were on her hips. "Well, genius, why don't you ask him while you pay. Maybe one brain dead idiot can understand another."

"Fuck you."

"You wish."

But as I paid for the gas, I began to understand Boop's frustration. The kid behind the counter looked like he had escaped from junior high. But that wasn't what bothered me the most. I swear the kid looked almost... transparent. No, that's not right. I couldn't exactly see through him. But it was almost as if he didn't quite register on the eyes

like he should have. But when he handed me back my credit card, his hand felt solid enough. I chalked it up to too many hours driving.

When I got back to the car, Boop was sitting in her seat with the door open to keep the car from getting too hot. She still looked angry, but there was something else about her as well—a look of confusion to put it bluntly.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her as I started the car and an anaemic stream of cool air flowed out of the air vents.

“Nothing.”

“No, tell me,” I said gently. Something was really upsetting her and it wasn’t just the cigarettes. I cursed myself for not noticing it sooner.

“Did you notice anything funny about that kid back there at the counter?”

My heart caught in my throat. “Like what?” I asked carefully.

“Like he was... not really... like...”

I decided to let her off the hook. “Like you could almost see through him?”

She looked at me strangely. “You saw it, too?”

“I figured it was just tired eyes or something like that,” I told her.

“Are you guys trying to fuck with my mind?” Gordy asked, practically forgotten in the back seat. “What the hell are you talking about anyway?”

“Never mind, Gordy,” I told him. “It must have just been a trick of the light or something.”

“Well, if you’re worried about your eyes being tired, let’s stop and eat,” Gordy suggested.

“Food,” Jess added.

I hadn’t forgotten Gordy’s earlier request to find a Mickey D’s, but fortunately, the town of Ovid seemed to have no representatives of any of the major franchises, which suited me just fine. “Maybe I’ll head

down to the main drag and find someplace,” I suggested.

“You can eat fast food for once in your life,” Boop chided me. “There’s a place up ahead that looks okay.”

Rusty’s Burger Barn, the sign said. Another sign advertised ‘Rusty’s Best Burgers’ under a neon bull. The place was twenty years out of date and wouldn’t have attracted flies next to a new *McDonald’s*, but it looked clean and the cooking odors I was starting to pick up through the air conditioner smelled as if the grease wasn’t ten days old like it was in most old burger joints. My stomach turned at the thought of a burger. Well, maybe they had decent malts. So I pulled into a parking space right next to the front door.

“Food,” Jess said again, but this time it was part of a contented sigh.

Most of the lunch crowd must have already cleared out. Well, it was close to two, I realized, and in most small towns late lunches were frowned upon. There were only a couple of customers in the place—both about college age and both were studying as they drank their drinks. Two waitresses chatted behind the counter. Both of the girls looked to be about the same age as their patrons. Given the look of the place, I had half expected them to be dressed in those dopey old pink waitress dresses and tennis shoes. Okay, they were wearing sneakers I could see through the break in the counter, but short denim skirts and tank tops seemed to be the uniforms of the day. One was blonde and quite pretty, while the other was a cute but not exactly pretty redhead. But there was something else about the redhead...

Boop grabbed my arm. “Grant, do you see what I see?”

“I think so,” I replied. The redhead was like the kid at the convenience store. It was almost as if I could see through her.

“What’s the problem?” Gordy asked as we all were grouped just inside the door.

“Look at the redhead,” I told him.

He glanced at her. “Yeah, kind of cute, but not your type, Grant.”

Boop and I just looked at him. He shrugged. “Look, are we going to

eat or what? I thought you guys were in a hurry to get to Muskogee.” He hurried ahead of us and picked out a booth, Jess right behind him.

“Should we ask Jess?” Boop whispered to me.

“Why?” I replied. “Jess is so out of it, I don’t think he knows what’s going on. He probably sees semitransparent people every day.”

Reluctantly, we joined them in the booth. I was a little relieved as the blonde came over to wait on us. “Hi guys, what...?” Her voice trailed off as she looked at us, her blue eyes growing wide. “Oh my God, you’re Grant Douglas!” she gasped.

I gave her a closer look. The girl—Gwen according to her nametag—looked to be no more than nineteen. I didn’t think anyone under the age of thirty even knew who I was.

“And you’re Boop McCarthy!” Boop flushed at her nickname. “And Gordy Maxwell. And Jess Conroy!” Gordy smiled at being recognized but Jess didn’t look up as he was too busy sprinkling salt on the back of his hand, observing it as if it were a critical scientific experiment.

“Jeez... *Interossiter!*”

“I’m surprised you’ve heard of us,” I told her with one of those disarming grins.

“Are you kidding?” she gushed. “When I was in high school, you guys were my favorite band.”

“I’d guess you’d be more into something more current, like the Dave Mathews Band,” I told her. “After all, you’ve only been out of high school—what—a couple of years?”

She looked confused for a moment, then flushed herself. “Oh yeah... well, I mean, sure I like the current bands and all and... Hey, look, what can I get you guys?”

I looked at her puzzled as we ordered. She had an embarrassed, almost flustered air about her as if she had almost said something she shouldn’t have said. Once she had our order, she gave us another shy smile and bustled back to the kitchen.

“What was that all about?” Boop said, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and offering one to Gordy. “She acts like she said something wrong.” Boop pulled her lighter out and flicked it. It didn’t even spark. “Shit!”

“Try mine,” Gordy said, pulling a Bic lighter out of his pocket. He flicked it and got the same result. “Crap!” he muttered. “That’s a brand-new lighter.”

“So was mine,” Boop told him. Then she yelled out at the girls behind the counter, “Hey anybody got a light?”

“Sorry!” they both said in unison.

“Shit!” Boop growled again.

I was actually happy about it. It would be the first meal I had shared with them in a long time where I didn’t have to gasp for clean air.

And maybe it was just the clean air, or maybe it was the quality of the food, or perhaps it was both, but in any case, I enjoyed that lunch more than any I had eaten in weeks. My stomach had been bothering me for a couple of months—an ulcer, I suspected. So I had tried to avoid fast food whenever I could. The meal at Rusty’s didn’t taste like fast food, though. The BLT I had ordered tasted crisp and flavorful, unlike the ones I had eaten in recent years. The bread was so tasty it made the toast taste almost sweet, and I had no doubt that the mayo had never come from a jar. As for the lettuce and tomato, it reminded me of the fresh-picked kind I had enjoyed years before on my grandparents’ farm. And the bacon was sugar-cured and cooked to perfection.

They say smells, sounds and taste can invoke the past more than sights, I mused as I washed a bite of sandwich down with a big gulp of the vanilla malt I had ordered. If so, then sitting there in Rusty’s was like a trip back to my childhood, accompanying my grandfather into town for a lunch at a variety store lunch counter—the kind that had disappeared from the cities where I had been raised long before I was out of diapers.

The rest of the group had mellowed out when the food had arrived as

well. Boop was ravaging a chicken sandwich like starving raptor, and Gordy had made a Double Rusty Burger (with cheese) disappear and was seriously thinking about ordering another. Even Jess seemed happy, sucking down a plate of French fries. I mean that literally. Surely he had to be chewing them, but it didn't look like it.

"Are you guys going to be playing around here?" Gwen asked with excitement as she brought us our bill.

"We'll be playing in Muskogee," I told her, grabbing the bill.

Her face fell. "Oh, darn!"

"It can't be that far," I told her. "What is it, an hour or so from here?" Notice my subtle way of asking for directions?

"About that," she agreed. "But I'm not allowed to go there."

That surprised me. Gwen looked to be about college age and there was no wedding ring on her finger. I would have thought an unattached girl her age wouldn't need permission to drive an hour away. "So who's stopping you? Your parents?"

"No," she laughed. "I live on campus."

"Then who's stopping you?" I repeated.

Her smile disappeared. "That gets kind of... complicated."

I frowned at that. It sounded as if Gwen had a possessive boyfriend or something. I remembered a guy my cousin dated who was like that—telling her what she could and couldn't do. She must have figured out what I was thinking, because she added, "No it's not like that. It's..."

Suddenly, her expression changed, as if she had had a shocking thought. "Oh boy, I just... Look, you guys need to hurry up and get on the road. You need to get out of town."

"Town..." Jess said.

I gave her a confused smile. "But I thought Muskogee was only an hour away. I doubt if the van with our equipment is even there yet."

"It won't be there at all if you don't hurry," she told me, only adding to

my confusion. "Please... I really like your music. I'd hate to... I mean... Just go!"

I flipped a few bills out of my wallet, more than enough to handle the tab and a nice tip. Thrusting it into her hand, I said nothing. She seemed to be on the verge of crying.

"Come on, guys, we need to go."

"Go..." Jess mumbled.

"What the fuck was all that about?" Boop asked once we were all back in the car. She pushed the lighter in and waited impatiently for it to heat up.

"Beats the shit out of me," I replied, checking around for a sign that might tell me in which direction Muskogee lay. "Maybe she's on the same shit Jess is taking."

"Fucking lighter!" Boop had her fingers on the business end of the van's lighter. Cold gray metal shone instead of the bright orange signature of a working lighter.

"Maybe now is a good time to give up smoking," I suggested with no little sarcasm.

"You wish!"

"Ghost."

"What?" we all said, looking at Jess who had just mumbled the word. Jess managed to nod his head. Following his nod, we watched as a couple who looked to be in their twenties got out of a nearby car parked just down from ours and headed into Rusty's. Now I'll admit that I might have been mistaken about the clerk in the convenience store or the redheaded waitress in Rusty's, but this couple was walking in broad daylight... and they were almost transparent. Again, I couldn't exactly see through them, but it was as if they were somehow less than solid. It was as if I could visualize what was behind them without really seeing it.

"Ghost," Jess mumbled again.

“What the hell is he talking about?” Gordy asked.

“It’s that couple,” Boop told him. “Can’t you see anything wrong with them?”

Gordy shrugged. “What? She’s a little young for him? What exactly am I supposed to see?”

Neither of us answered. There wasn’t really much we could say, I suppose. I just got the sudden feeling that the waitress back inside Rusty’s had been doing us a big favor when she told us to get out of town. There was something very, very wrong about Ovid, Oklahoma, and I wasn’t in a mood to find out what that was.

I punched the accelerator and felt a little skid as we hit some gravel on the way out of the parking lot. The worn tires shuddered as they tried to catch hold of the pavement of the street.

“What’s the hurry?” Boop asked. I didn’t have to look at her face to hear the worry in her voice.

“We need to get out of here.”

“Grant, you’re scaring me!” Gordy called out nervously as the van shuddered as I got back into the traffic lane.

“Shut up, Gordy!” I didn’t want to discuss anything until all of Ovid was in my rear-view mirror. It was funny how quickly it all hit me. I guess the transparent couple was just the final straw. Already that day I had narrowly avoided being sucked up in a tornado, I had seen ghostly people all over the place, and I had been warned by a waitress (and a fan who seemed far too young to be one of our fans) that we needed to get out of town—fast. Put it all together, along with Boop’s bitching and everyone else in the van being high on nicotine or drugs and I had had just about all I could take.

And it wasn’t over yet.

My attempt to get out of Ovid had just met with disaster. The sudden whoop of a police siren, coupled with the sight of flashing red and blue lights, told me that if my day hadn’t already been fucked to the limit, it was about to be.

“Local fuzz,” Gordy told me, looking back over his shoulder. “Maybe you can just pay him and we can get out of here.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. But somehow, I had a feeling it wasn’t going to be all that simple. If I had known then how right that feeling was, I might have tried to make a run for it.

I had about five hundred in cash on me. That may seem like a lot for the de facto leader of a has-been band to be carrying around, but there it was. Slipping your setup guy a twenty here and there can make all the difference in getting things to go smoothly. Besides, merchants in the towns we usually played don’t like to take anything but cash from a forty-something guy with his hair too long wearing a *Motley Crue* t-shirt. So I had an image to maintain, so what?

Unfortunately, that image wasn’t going to be much of a help to me right at that moment. Small town cops figure most guys like me are trouble. I just hoped I could get by with slipping him a fifty and a promise to get out of town by the closest available route.

I must have been deep in thought assessing my options, for as I sat there in the van I had carefully pulled over to the curb, I hadn’t even heard the cop get out of his cruiser. The next thing I knew, he was standing right next to the window I had at least remembered to roll down. He was tall—well over six feet—and looked as if he should be on a recruiting poster for the State Police rather than wasting his time in Tank Town, USA. He was trim and looked as if he could run a marathon without breathing hard. His gray-blue uniform shirt was pressed military style with sharp creases down the front. The mirrored sunglasses he wore were almost polished, reflecting the afternoon sun into my eyes.

“Is there something wrong, Officer?” I asked with the age-old greeting all traffic offenders know so well.

“You left that parking lot at Rusty’s a little fast,” the officer said blandly. So that’s the way it was, I thought. Ovid was one of those towns where if they couldn’t catch you speeding, they’d stop you on some chicken shit charge just to soak a few bucks out of you.

“Sorry,” I said obsequiously. It never hurt to toady up to a cop—especially a crooked one. “We were on our way to Muskogee for a gig—you know, a band performance—and I may have been in a little bit of a hurry. Is there something I can do to make this right?” The something I was referring to, of course, was a greenish piece of paper bearing the picture of a dead president.

“Yes, there is something you can do,” he told me blandly. That was no surprise. What he said next was. “You can follow me over to City Hall to see The Judge.”

“Now wait a minute!” I interjected, losing my cool at the rebuff of my bribe. “We haven’t got time for that. We...”

“Yes, I know,” he broke in. “You have a gig.”

From most people, that would have been a sarcastic comment. The officer—Officer Mercer, according to the silver nametag on his shirt—seemed to be incapable of sarcasm, though. With a sigh, I realized that he was all business, and meeting our date with a small town magistrate was the only way we were ever going to get back on the road. “Okay,” I finally replied. “Lead on.”

“I’m calling Jens,” Boop announced, pulling a cell phone from the canvas bag she used as a purse cum carryall. Jens was our agent such as it was. If we wanted to blame anyone—besides ourselves—for getting gigs in the backwater of the Bible Belt, Jens was our man. From his rundown office in LA, he kept us busy but never exactly prosperous. He wasn’t going to be happy when he found out we’d blown the opening of the Muskogee gig. After all, he got fifteen per cent of our take, and fifteen percent of nothing was still nothing.

“Damn!” Boop growled, throwing the phone back into the bag. “No service.”

“Cell phones don’t work everywhere,” I reminded her as I followed the cruiser toward what passed for a business district in Ovid.

“Cell phones don’t work anywhere where we do,” she muttered. “It fucking serves Jens right. He books us out here in the middle of

Cowpie, Texas..."

"Oklahoma," I corrected.

"Okay, Cowpie, Oklahoma. Anyhow, if he's gonna book us in these burls he's gonna have to know we can't always reach him when there's trouble."

"Maybe we can call from the court after we see this judge," I suggested, wheeling into the parking lot of this neat two-story granite building with columns out in front as if they were trying to make an office building look like a Greek temple or something. I suppose for a town like Ovid, it was a reasonably impressive building. They probably paid for it from fining motorists who were passing through, I thought darkly.

I was sure that Ovid was nothing more than a speed trap. After all, this Officer Mercer had done a few things wrong when he stopped me, and believe me, I've been stopped by experts. I never learned how to drive slowly, so I had collected more than a few speeding tickets in my life. First, he hadn't asked to see my license or registration. I was certain the only thing in my wallet he wanted to see was the color of my money. And he hadn't been curious about Jess. To be honest, I was sure he'd notice Jess out there in Never-Never Land and check the car for drugs. Boop and Gordy probably had a little pot on board, and Jess probably had enough pills to make a small city high. I had given all that crap up a few years ago, but I would have been brought up on charges, too. Yet the cop hadn't even noticed.

One thing did surprise me, though. When we got out of the car, our Officer Mercer no longer had the laconic look of a cop on his own turf. If I hadn't known better, I would have sworn there was real concern behind those mirrored glasses. Now, he noticed Jess. Of course, that was to be expected. Gordy had to pull Jess out of the car since our drummer was almost unconscious.

"You didn't let him take something else, did you?" I whispered to Gordy as I helped him with Jess.

"No," Gordy whispered back. "But he may have taken something when

I wasn't looking. I've never seen him this wasted before."

Neither had I, but I didn't say it. Boop was concerned, too, I noticed. Boop had been known to pop a pill or two but she was careful when she did. There was no doubt given the look on her face that she was worried about Jess.

"Quickly!" Officer Mercer ordered, bringing us back to our current legal situation.

"I think he needs a doctor," I called out.

Officer Mercer shook his head. "It's too late for that. He has to see The Judge."

"Listen!" I lashed out. "I think he may be dying."

"Given what he's taken today, it's a miracle that he isn't already dead," the officer replied.

"But how...?"

"Now, Mr. Douglas, before it's too late."

Before I could argue, an attractive black woman in a uniform similar to Officer Mercer's rushed out of the building and grabbed one side of Jess's body while Gordy wrestled with the other side.

"We have to forgo the paperwork, Wanda," Officer Mercer told the woman.

"I know," she said, struggling with Jess who was considerably larger than she was. "I just heard. We've only got five minutes."

"Five minutes until what?" I demanded, confused.

"Five minutes until your friend is dead," she called over her shoulder.

The courtroom was chaos. An attractive blonde woman hurried in with us, opening the large oak door that guarded the courtroom. In side at the defendant's table, another attractive woman—this one a brunette—was spreading some papers on the table. Like the blonde, she was dressed casually—denim shorts and a yellow tee. She was a damned fine looking woman if I do say so.

Jess was propped up in one of the chairs at the table. I thought for a minute he was going to collapse but Gordy held him up. Boop and I sat down on their left, leaving me beside the attractive brunette.

"I'm your attorney," she said quickly. "Susan Jager. Sorry to be dressed so casually, but I took the day off and just got called in to court a few minutes ago." She didn't bother to shake hands with any of us, and I notice Boop was having a wonderful time watching our attorney wiggle her attractive ass as she arranged her paperwork before sitting down next to me. "We'll talk after the trial."

"Look, our friend should be in a hospital," I told her.

"Your friend would be dead before we could get him there," Susan said, shaking her head.

I felt almost as if I was in the middle of a strange play called *Alice in Wonderland Meets Perry Mason*. All the trappings of the legal system were being spread out before us while our friend was—according to the locals—dying. It didn't make any sense at all. What were we doing in a courtroom when we should be in a hospital? Boop, Gordy and I should have protested more, but I think we were so confused by the absurdity of the situation that we just sat there at the defendant's table.

Suddenly, Officer Mercer called out, "All rise! Municipal Court of Ovid, Oklahoma, is now in session, the honorable Judge presiding." He said it so quickly that all the words seemed to run together.

At that moment, I was aware of another player in the room as I rose to my feet with the rest of our table. The Judge looked the part. He was not terribly tall—at least a couple of inches under my six two, I estimated. Brown hair and a mostly-brown beard gave him more the look of a scholar than a magistrate. Like everyone else in the courtroom, he seemed to be in a terrible hurry, still buttoning his black robe as he sat on the bench.

"Stand aside!" he commanded in a voice used to being obeyed. The order was aimed at Gordy who had been trying to hold Jess up.

"He's nearly gone!" Officer Mercer called out.

“Just what the fuck is going on here?” Boop yelled.

“I will not tolerate such language in my courtroom,” The Judge’s voice boomed, actually hurting my ears. Boop gasped and tried to speak but no sound passed her lips.

“Your Honor!” our attorney blurted out. “I think he’s dead!”

“Not yet he isn’t,” The Judge muttered, his eyes fixed on Jess. I looked at Jess in alarm. He was standing, but no one could stand in the manner he was posed. Although on his feet, he looked more like a scarecrow, as if there was a rod jammed up his back to keep him from slumping over like a pile of lifeless straw. The judge had been right—I could see that Jess was still breathing, but his breaths were ragged gasps, barely sufficient to keep his lungs working.

The Judge said something, almost in a chant, but I couldn’t catch what it was. It sounded like gibberish to me, but every now and then I heard a word that sounded familiar. Languages had never been my strong suit. The strange thing was the effect it seemed to have on Jess. A golden glow surrounded him, and within that glow, his gasps for breath seemed to have stopped. I couldn’t detect any sign of breathing from him, yet I could detect very slight movement, almost as if he was sleeping. Yet he hung there so relaxed that I couldn’t imagine what was holding him up.

I found I was standing—all of us were. It was as if we had all tried to move to prop up Jess only to find ourselves suspended in space. I found that with effort, I could move my arms and head, but my legs seemed to be locked in place as I stood next to Gordy and Boop.

“Your Honor,” Susan Jager began, trying to look like as much of a professional attorney as her tee and denim shorts would allow, “I move that the trial be postponed until tomorrow morning so that my client can have suitable medical care.”

“I can’t allow that,” The Judge told her bluntly. “Ms. Jager, your client has not been stabilized. I have merely captured him in a moment in time. That moment can only be slowed but not stopped. Unless we continue with the trial right now, Jess Conroy will die and no medical

treatment can stop that.”

There were a hundred questions I wanted to ask, but none of them came to my lips. Maybe like Boop, I would have been silenced by the strange magistrate on the bench if I had tried. I could do nothing but stand there, held in place by some improbable force, while that strange play was acted out around me.

“Yes, Your Honor,” our attorney said, sinking into her chair.

“Officer Mercer, read the charges, and quickly. Maintaining this time indolence is tiring,” The Judge said. His voice had returned to normal, no longer booming through the courtroom, but I had no doubt that it would be any less obeyed.

“Charges are careless driving and possession of illegal drugs,” Officer Mercer said simply.

“Your Honor,” our attorney interjected, “only Mr. Conroy was in actual possession of drugs at the time of the arrest.”

“Yes, but all of the defendants had knowledge of the drugs,” The Judge pointed out. “The charge will stand.”

The Judge then looked sternly at our attorney. “Ms. Jager, I am tiring quickly. I will give you dispensation to speak with as many of your clients as you feel necessary this evening after a verdict has been reached and sentence passed. But please do not try to entertain me with your normally amusing antics in this courtroom today. I have neither the energy or the patience to appreciate them. Do I make myself clear?”

Susan Jager’s face seemed to lose its color. “Yes, Your Honor.”

“Then if there is nothing further to be said, I will pass...”

“Wait a minute!” I yelled, actually a little surprised that I was able to speak at all. “Can I say something?”

“If you must,” The Judge sighed.

“What kind of a put-up trial is this?” I began, feeling my temper rise. “You drag us in here and...”

“Enough!” The Judge boomed, and in that moment, anything I tried to say was lost. Air escaped from my mouth but there was no sound.

“Let me tell you what kind of a trial this is, Mr. Douglas,” he began to lecture, leaning forward from the bench. “This is the trial of four very talented individuals who wasted their talents until they had none left. It is the trial of four people who all feel that if it hadn’t been for the others, they would have been more successful. It is the trial of four individuals who should have learned long ago that their strength lay in their unity. And it is a trial which has reached its end!”

He started again in that strange language that he had uttered when he was focused on Jess. I don’t know why but I braced myself, as if I might have done facing a strong wind. I suppose in a way, I was as I felt a cool breeze blow across my skin and heard what almost sounded like whispers on the breeze. It made my skin tingle, and even as the breeze abated, the tingle was still there.

“Court is adjourned!” The Judge pronounced with a sharp rap of his gavel. I recovered just quickly enough to see him retreating from the courtroom with Officer Mercer right behind him. The blonde woman who had come in with us and settled in the gallery also made her exit as silently and as unobtrusively as possible. The four of us were left alone with our attorney. Jess, I noticed, had slumped back into a chair. He seemed to be sleeping, though, rather than trapped in a drug-induced stupor. His ragged breathing had become regular once more.

“That was a near thing,” our attorney breathed.

“Look, what the hell is going on here?” I asked, my voice cracking suddenly as if I were experiencing puberty again. I hoped suddenly that there was nothing wrong with me. After all, if this weird bunch was finished with us, we had a gig that night. It wouldn’t do if I couldn’t sing.

Susan Jager looked at each of us as if she was expecting something to happen. “This would be a lot easier if everything had gone normally,” she said, adding not one bit of clarification to our situation.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Boop asked. Then she suddenly

cleared her throat. Her voice had become huskier through the years as she continued to smoke, but just for a moment, it sounded almost like a man's voice. Maybe we were both coming down with something. Great, just great.

The pretty young attorney scribbled something on the top sheet of her legal pad and handed it to me. "Look, go here to the address I've written down for you. Give me a few hours. I have to talk to The Judge first and finish a couple of things at the office, but I'll be there as soon as I can. Actually, let's make it eight o'clock, all right?"

"What the hell is this all about?" I asked, taking the sheet of paper in spite of myself. "Is everybody in this town crazy? Do we have to pay a fine or what? Are we free to go?"

"Just be at that address."

"We don't have time for this," I argued. "We've got a gig—you know, a performance. We can't just..."

"Be there!" she ordered us as she gathered her belongings and rushed from the room.

As the large oak door closed behind her, the four of us were left alone. I looked at the others, noticing for the first time that something had changed. After all the years we had been together, I knew each of the members of the group better than I had known my own family. I knew every feature of their bodies, every gesture they made, and every sound they could utter. So why did they suddenly look different to me?

Jess was the first one I noticed. At first, I thought he was just slumped down in his seat, but all at once I noticed he seemed somehow smaller. It wasn't as if he had shrunk to Lilliputian proportions; it was just that he looked shorter than he should be. And his dark, thinning hair seemed somehow lighter and fuller.

Boop noticed, too. "What the hell?" There was that deeper voice again.

"Let's get him out to the van," I suggested. "He still doesn't look good."

“I think I saw a sign for a hospital,” Gordy offered, slipping one of Jess’s arms around his shoulders while I got the other one. Damn! Jess may have looked smaller but I could have sworn he had put on fifty pounds. Either that or I was going to have to start working out again. It had to be additional weight, I thought, because Gordy was having trouble with him, too.

“She’s heavy,” Gordy grunted.

“What?” I asked. “What did you say?” I looked at Gordy. He and I were virtually the same height, but suddenly he appeared a good three or four inches shorter than me. So was Jess for that matter, I realized.

We must have looked odd as we rushed to our van on strangely uncoordinated limbs. Only Boop looked as if she was having no trouble. If anything, she seemed taller and more solid than any of the rest of us. And why was her hair suddenly so short and so brown?

“Come on!” she ordered, shoving back the sliding door on the van to let Gordy and I shove Jess in.

“Get that out of the way!” I yelled to Boop, indicating a colorful object on the back car seat.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Damned if I know.”

“You shouldn’t curse,” Gordy said suddenly in a prim voice about half an octave higher than normal.

“Jeez... it’s a Barbie doll,” Boop said, holding the toy up as if it were somehow radioactive.

“A what?”

“Oh Christ...” Boop’s deeper voice trailed off.

“What?” I demanded, breathing hard from carting Jess to the car.

“Look at yourself in the mirror,” she told me.

The side mirrors of a van aren’t exactly the best way to view your own image, but... my own image? The face looking back on me wasn’t my

face at all. My face had been described by Rolling Stone once as 'ruggedly handsome.' Well, the face I was looking at now was neither rugged nor handsome—or at least not handsome in the usual male sense of the word. The bones of my face seemed to be moving, rearranging themselves into something smoother and less linear. My skin was becoming lighter, the deep tan I had enjoyed since my surfing days in high school was being replaced by a creamy complexion accented by a significant dusting of tiny freckles. My eyes were no longer gray, shifting to a light blue instead. And my hair—well, it had been longish before but now it was a darker shade of brown—almost black—with what seemed like hundreds of tiny curls.

"Oh God!" I screamed, and that's just what it was—a scream, high-pitched and obviously feminine.

I turned and looked at Boop. Boop? No, it couldn't be Boop. The person beside me was bigger than Boop should be; hell, she (she?) was bigger than me. Boop's face was shifting as mine was, but instead of softening, I noticed tiny dark dots—stubble—appearing on her cheeks. Her hair seemed to be retreating into her head, even receding in front just a little. Her earrings dropped from her ears as I watched, blurring like an approaching mirage and disappearing from where they had fallen on the pavement.

"Mom, what's happening?" a high, worried voice called. I looked over at Gordy, but Gordy wasn't there anymore. Instead, there stood a child who could have been either male or female, his juvenile face confused and frightened. He was still wearing Gordy's clothing, but as I watched, the clothing seemed to shift and fold in upon itself.

I looked in the car to see what was happening to Jess. All I could see was a small body—even smaller than Gordy's—asleep on the seat, completely oblivious to the shifts of skin and material going on around him.

I don't know how long all of this took. It might have been an hour or it might have been just a few seconds. However long it took, there seemed to be nothing we could do to stop it. I felt weak in the knees, as if I wanted to fall to the ground and pass out, but I couldn't.

Something seemed to be holding me in place as parts of my body shifted inward while others shifted outward and my clothing modified itself to fit my new form.

“Mom?”

There was that child’s voice again, and it seemed to be directed at me. I looked around... No, I looked down at a cute little moppet of no more than ten (and probably less). She was dressed in shorts and sandals, her brown hair tied back in a ponytail. She wore a t-shirt with no sign of breasts in it. She had the freckles and knobby little knees so many children her age had, but there was promise of a future woman in her features. There was no doubt in my mind that this little wisp of a girl had until minutes before been Gordy.

“Mom?” she said again, worry in her voice. She was looking into my eyes.

It was a surreal moment, and I knew instinctively that this little girl saw in me the mother she sought. I became strangely aware in that moment that I had now changed as completely as Gordy. I was, indeed, the woman she thought I was. I took only a moment to glance down at my own body, noting respectable but not overly large breasts poking out from a pink tee. I could feel the denim shorts against my thighs but felt a strange absence between my legs. I could see my own smooth legs ending in small feet encased in sandals not unlike those the little girl wore.

“Holy shit!” a man’s voice muttered. I didn’t have to look over at him to realize it was Boop.

“Are we going home now, Mom?” the little girl asked. She obviously had no idea she had once been Gordy. As far as she was concerned, everything was normal.

“Look, Gor...” For some reason, I couldn’t say his name. Maybe it was because he no longer existed, I thought to myself. But more likely was the fact that the sweet little girl who was staring at me just didn’t look like a Gordy. “We’ll go in just a minute,” I managed to say calmly. “I... forgot something inside.”

The man Boop had become nodded to me as I turned to go back into the courtroom. The look on her... or rather his face was one of alarm. I raced back into the building. I had to find The Judge and talk him into changing us back into ourselves. I may have had other thoughts as well, but that was the only one I could concentrate on. The whole situation was just too preposterous to think about. Here we were, a rock band minding our own business when suddenly we're dragged before a small town justice and transformed, presumably by magic, into members of the opposite sex. It wasn't the sort of activity that promoted steady thinking.

As I got to the courtroom, the blonde woman who had been sitting in the gallery during our trial was just closing the door. "I have to see The Judge!" I cried out, amazed at how sweet and feminine my voice had become.

"He's already left," she told me with a knowing little smile as she looked at my new body.

"Left? Left where? I have to see him," I demanded. "Even if I have to go to his home, I have to see him."

"I'm afraid that's impossible," she told me. "He... well, no one knows exactly where he lives."

"But look what he did to me!" I cried out, motioning to my new body.

"He was pretty lenient with all of you considering," the blonde told me. Then she held out a hand. "I'm Cindy Patton, by the way."

Numbly, I took her hand. Her handshake was firm for a woman, and I couldn't help but notice our hands were about the same size. "What did you mean about him being lenient?" I managed to ask.

She smiled a little wider, relieved that I seemed to be calming down just a little. I didn't feel calmer, but what else could I do?

"The Judge hates drugs," she explained.

"But I don't take drugs," I pointed out. "None of us do—did. Except Jess, that is."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. For years you've let Jess turn his mind into jelly with every hallucinogenic drug imaginable. It's a wonder he didn't kill himself a long time ago. And if he had, it would have been your fault—all of you."

"Now wait a minute, Jess is a big boy..."

"Not anymore."

Come to think of it, I hadn't seen Jess since his transformation was complete. However, given that I had seen him shrinking, I had no doubt that he was now a child like Gordy. It seemed as if we had been changed into a typical American family, with Gordy and Jess as the kids, Boop as the father, and me... Well, I didn't want to think about that at the moment.

"He has to change us back," I insisted.

"He won't," she replied. "In all the time I've been here, I've never seen him change anyone back—ever. If you're smart, you won't even ask him if you do see him. He's never changed anyone back, but he has made some of the changes worse."

Worse? What the hell could be worse than finding myself in the body of a small town mother of two? That was my first reaction. My second was a bit more somber, realizing in that moment that there were probably a lot worse things. I just didn't want to think of what some of those things might be.

But that, of course, didn't mean I had to like my transformation. Obviously, I didn't, I had never had any desire to be a woman or parade around in women's clothing. And as for sex, some rock stars might be into the bi scene but not me. I was still one-hundred percent all-American heterosexual male—at least in my mind.

"Look," Cindy said, taking my hand gently in hers, "I know Susan will be over to talk to you this evening. Save your questions until then. The Judge has given her dispensation to fill you in. You should feel honored. He seldom does that, but given the emergency nature of your trial, he decided to give all of you a break. Now, do any of the

others remember who they were before?"

"Uh... yes," I managed. "Boop and I know. I don't think Gordy does and I'm not sure about Jess. He was still pretty well stoned."

"Actually, he's probably sleeping by now. Be careful when he wakes up. If he doesn't remember who he was, he might be a little alarmed if you act strange."

"Like Gordy," I thought out loud, remembering the look of confusion on the little girl's face when I nearly called her Gordy.

"Exactly," Cindy said, ushering me out. "Now I know this is going to be hard for you, but just remember, all of us have gone through the same thing. Just get your bearings and try to make the best of it."

"I'll try," I muttered. "But this isn't over yet."

"Probably not," she agreed, leaving me as confused as I had been when I came in.

"So what did The Judge say?" Boop asked as I stumbled back out to the car. And I do mean stumbled. I had been wrong when I assumed my sandals were like Gordy's. The ones he, or rather she, now wore were flat whereas mine had a small but pronounced heel, causing me to walk as if balanced on my toes. It was strange that I hadn't noticed them as I had marched in to see The Judge. Maybe if I didn't think about them, my body would act as if wearing them was natural.

"He wasn't there," I told Boop, glancing over to see if Gordy was listening. She wasn't; she appeared occupied with the Barbie doll as she sat there in the van with the door open. Beside her was a small sleeping form, and although I couldn't tell for sure, Jess's tiny pink shirt indicated to me that Jess was now as female as I.

"Then let's find him!" Boop demanded, causing me to cringe a little. Boop had been forceful enough as a woman, but in the impressive male body she now wore, she was downright intimidating.

"We can't," I told... him. I went on to explain what Cindy had told me.

"I don't know if we can trust her or not," Boop mused.

“Trust has nothing to do with it,” I told him. “Don’t you see? We don’t have a choice. This Judge has magical—almost godlike—powers. The best we can do is play along tonight and hope we can get to him tomorrow.”

“But what about our gig?”

I sighed. “You know, Boop, I’ve got a strange feeling that’s the least of our problems. I wouldn’t even be surprised to find out that the people in Muskogee who hired us don’t even remember doing so.”

He frowned. “What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know,” I said with an unintentional feminine shrug. “Woman’s intuition I guess.”

We didn’t have any trouble finding the address Susan had given us. She had even sketched out a simple map for us, and besides, Ovid wasn’t such a large town that we could get lost.

On the way to the address, I had an opportunity to look around at the town. Normally I would have been driving, but for some reason, Boop slipped behind the wheel and I hadn’t objected. We drove right through the business district, and it was easy to see Ovid was a prosperous little town. There were no closed storefronts, no signs of obvious disrepair, and most of the cars parked along the main drag were reasonably new. That was on the plus side. On the other side of the coin, the citizens of Ovid who bustled into their cars for what must have passed for rush hour in the town were to a large degree transparent—or a reasonably close facsimile. Maybe that’s what they really were, I thought—a facsimile. Maybe they weren’t real at all.

But no, I realized, that couldn’t be right. I had touched one of them in the convenience store when I had bought gas and he felt as real as I was.

As real as I was?

I had to stifle an hysterical giggle. I was hardly real, was I? I mean, the real me had simply disappeared like water down the drain, leaving me in this... this... body. I looked down at myself reluctantly trying to

reconcile reality with the two substantial breasts beneath my tee shirt.

“So where the hell in Linden Street?” Boop muttered in that deep, masculine voice she—he—had acquired.

“How should I know?” I growled. “You have the map.”

“It should have been back a street or two.”

“There’s a gas station,” I pointed out, nodding at a little neighborhood station ahead. “You can stop and ask there.”

“No need. I’ll find it,” he said gruffly.

“Daddy, you missed our street!” the little girl who had been Gordy screeched.

Boop brought the van to a halt in the middle of the street. “Where?”

“Back there, silly,” she pointed with a grin at a sign partially obscured by a tree. “You know where we live.”

Gordy was starting to really freak me out. And what was going to happen when Jess woke up? I turned and looked at what was left of Jess—a tiny shape in a smaller version of what Gordy and I were wearing, asleep on the seat. She—and Jess was most certainly now a ‘she’—was twisted inside the seat belt at an odd angle, sleeping soundly. It was a peaceful sleep, unlike the unsettled drug-induced near comas Jess usually fell into. I actually hoped for his sake that when he woke up, he was like Gordy. It was bad enough to wake up as the wrong sex, but to wake up in the body of a little child would be too much for me.

Boop suddenly announced, “Let’s play a game.”

“Okay!” Gordy said cheerfully.

“Let’s pretend Daddy... and Mommy don’t remember anything about where we live or even who you are, okay?”

“Sure!” Gordy agreed.

Turning the van to head up Linden Street, I had to grin in spite of myself. Apparently Gordy thought she had always been our daughter.

She saw nothing wrong, but if we seemed too disoriented, she might worry. So why not use her under the ruse of a game to learn more about our transformed selves?

“So where do we live?” Gordy asked as we cruised down the street.

“You’re getting warmer,” Gordy chuckled in her girlish little voice.

“Warmer... warmer... oh you’re burning up!”

With a smug smile, Boop pulled into the driveway of a modest but adequate two-story house with beige clapboard siding and a brick façade in front. I tried to ignore his smugness, fishing away inside the purse that I had found at my feet in the car for what might pass for a front door key. Still smug, Boop pushed the button on the garage door opener which was attached to the visor. “Five will get you ten the door to the house is unlocked,” he whispered to me. I had no intention of taking that bet.

Sure enough, the door was unlocked. As I held the door open, Boop marched in, holding the little girl who was all that was left of Jess while Gordy walked confidently past us, presumably to her room since she ran up the stairs before us.

I stayed downstairs in the kitchen trying to make some sense of things while Boop took Jess, still asleep, upstairs. I could feel my heart thumping madly and the blood rushing through my head as I rummaged through the purse looking for anything that might tell me who I—we—had become. I extracted a large women’s wallet and began pulling every scrap of information from it I could find. The kitchen table was covered with small slips of paper when Boop came in the room.

“Jess is still asleep and Gordy is... well, I guess she’s playing in her room,” he announced.

“Well, I’ve figured out who we are,” I told him as he walked over to my side to see what I had been studying. Holding up a driver’s license with the usual bad picture on it, I told him, “I’m Donna Lou Pearson, age twenty eight, and according to the check book, you’re Marty Pearson, Jr. By the way, there’s four hundred and twelve dollars in that account.”

“Yeah, I know,” Boop sighed. “I looked in my wallet after I dropped Jess off. How the hell do men get used to carrying a bulge on their butts like that wallet? By the way, I’m the same age you are.”

“Well, at least we’re younger,” I pointed out, looking at the small stack of credit cards in my name.

“And the wrong sex,” he pointed out. “By the way, Gordy is Alicia and Jess is Kimberly. Their names are on their doors in pink letters.”

“How cute,” I said sarcastically.

“Something else, too,” Boop told me. “While I was upstairs, I called the hotel we supposed to be playing at tonight. I told them I was you.”

“What did they say?”

He shrugged. “They’ve never heard of you—or the band.”

“What?” It was one thing to find myself in the body of a young mother in some tank town in the middle of nowhere, but to find out that I—or at least my former self—was an unknown was almost too much to take. Then I remembered my ‘women’s intuition’ remark. Still, I had to be sure. “Maybe you got the wrong hotel.”

“No, it was the right hotel. I remembered the name. They’ve never heard of us.”

“Mom!” It was... Alicia yelling from the top of the stairs. I looked at... Marty and he pointed at me.

“What?” I managed at last.

“When’s dinner?”

Dinner?

“You’re the happy homemaker now,” Marty teased. “You know, you’re supposed to have dinner on the table for your family.”

“Bull. Do I look like...?” I stopped. Yes, come to think of it, I did. “What do I tell her?”

“What did your mother always tell you?”

Right. "In a little while... dear."

"Okay!" I heard a door close. Apparently, she had gone back to her play.

"Look, I'll help you," Marty said. "As I recall, you can't even boil water."

"I can make soup!" I told him defensively. "And toasted cheese sandwiches."

After a moment's thought, he allowed, "I suppose that will do. Let's get to it."

"Wait just a minute," I told him, grabbing his arm and realizing for the first time just how much bigger than me he had become. "Aren't you giving in to this just a little too easily? This isn't who we are. Why give them the satisfaction of acting the way they want us to act?"

"So what are you going to do, Donna?" He emphasized my new name. "Alicia doesn't remember being Gordy. Are you going to tell her there's no dinner tonight because none of us are really who we appear to be? Are you going to go street by street looking for that damned Judge and demand that he change us back?"

"Well..."

"Beside, that lawyer—Susan Something-or-other—is coming by in a little while to explain things to us. Why not just play the game until she gets here?"

"That's easy for you to say," I spat. "You get to be the big guy."

"You think I like being a man?"

"Don't you? You're into girls. Now you can really be into girls." As I made my pun, I tried not to think about who the girl he was most likely to try to get 'into' was.

"I'm not arguing with you," he muttered. "I'm fixing dinner. You can help or you can sulk or you can go screaming out into the street for all I care." As if to emphasize a point, he opened a cabinet and pulled out a soup pan.

“How did you know where that was?” I asked, suddenly alarmed at how he had not even had to search for the pan.

“Huh? I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking about it. It was just a reaction.”

I thought for a moment. There was more going on here than I had first realized. It was one thing to be physically changed into other people, but the changes might be even deeper than I anticipated. “All right,” I agreed at last. “We’ll make dinner together and wait until we’ve talked to Susan before we decide the next move. I’ll try to play the good little wife and mommy for the moment.”

“Good plan.”

Dinner was pretty simple stuff with both of us working on it. A couple of cans of tomato soup looked to be enough for us and I really could make a decent toasted cheese sandwich. Alicia marched into the kitchen, laid out utensils and napkins and poured four milks as if she had been doing it all her life. “I’ll wake up Kimberly,” she announced when she was finished.

Marty and I looked at each other and I know we were both thinking the same thing: did Kimberly remember being Jess? If she did, it would be best if Alicia didn’t wake her.

“Wait... dear,” I choked out trying to sound as motherly as I could. She stopped and looked at me, puzzled. “Je... Kimberly isn’t feeling well. Let’s let her nap and she can eat later.”

Alicia gave a chillingly childish shrug. “Okay.” Dutifully, she sat down at the table.

Marty and I shared a relieved glance and sat down as well.

“Hey!” Alicia laughed. “Why are you guys sitting down in the wrong chairs?”

“Oh, just to be different,” Marty said casually saving me from trying to think up an answer.

It’s difficult to explain how such a domestic moment as the three of us sitting there eating a mundane meal could be so unbelievably weird. I

had never bothered to marry—none of us had—and the family meal we were ‘enjoying’ was probably the first one any of us had had since we had left our respective homes. As normal as it would have seemed to most people, it was anything but normal to us.

To make matters worse, everything I ate seemed to have a slightly odd taste. It was the lipstick, I realized, adding a subtle and unpleasant taste to the food. How did women ever get used to it? Was there some trick of avoiding the taste that I as a former man didn’t understand? Or was it just that women got used to the taste? Maybe that was why most chefs were men.

I wasn’t going to like being a woman, I told myself. Oh maybe it wouldn’t have been a total loss to be someone like Fiona Apple or some other female rock star. But I was stuck as a housewife/mother in a town on the other side of nowhere. Apparently, I was expected to clean house, cook meals, take my daughters to ballet practice and please my husband in the sack just like mothers had done since marriage was invented. Sorry, but I didn’t want to play that game.

But what were my options? I wondered as I thoughtfully chewed on my sandwich. I was the victim of some power I couldn’t hope to understand. Unless I could find The Judge and convince him that this life was not for me, I’d be stuck with it—or worse. At least Boop had her—his—memory intact. What a horror it would have been if Gordy remembered his previous life and Boop didn’t. Then I’d be stuck with somebody who really thought he was my husband, and I’d be expected to play hide the hot dog with him, no questions asked and no quarter given. I could imagine myself back in The Judge’s courtroom trying to explain why I had chopped off my ‘husband’s’ willie rather than spread my legs for him. Knowing The Judge, he’d probably just provide him with a new one, bigger and better than the last one.

Marty and I kept glancing at the kitchen clock, and I know he was thinking the same thing I was. We were both counting the minutes until our attorney showed up with some answers. And the question we both wanted answered was the same: how do we get out of this place?

Both of us nearly jumped out of our chairs when the phone rang. It was our attorney, I told myself. She couldn't make it. We were on our own. Welcome to Wonderland, Alice. "H... hello?" I asked timidly.

"Is Allie there?"

Allie. Who the hell was Allie? Oh... Alicia. "Uh... Allie, it's for you."

A small hand grabbed the receiver. "Thanks, Mom."

What was going on? How did anyone know Allie? But obviously someone did. As I stood there statue stiff listening to my 'daughter's' side of the conversation, I realized she was an accepted member of the community.

"Hi, Michelle!

"No...

"Oh yuck!

"Right now?"

She put a tiny hand over the receiver. "Mom, can I go over to Michelle's until bedtime?"

"I..."

"Oh please, Mom. It's still light and her mother said she'd walk me home. It's only a block."

"Uh... all right." Actually, I was happy to see her go. Then Marty and I could talk openly without alarming her. I didn't exactly have to tell her twice. Calling a quick "bye" to us, she was out the door in a heartbeat—a small feminine blur.

"Oh God, Boop, what the hell is going on?"

"It's Marty—remember?" He was up from the table and put his big strong hands on my shoulders. Something inside me told me Marty was a handsome man—not that I had ever been in the habit of looking at men in that way. I sighed as he lightly massaged my shoulders. It was a comfortable sensation, and I almost unconsciously let myself fall back against him until I realized what I had been about to do.

I turned toward him, jumping away from his hands. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He looked a little surprised, and not at my outburst. He was looking down at his hands as if they were two alien objects. “I... I don’t know.”

“Well keep your hands to yourself!”

Before he could answer, we were both startled by a piercing scream from upstairs. Apparently Jess was awake. We rushed into... her room. She was just sitting there on the side of her bed hyperventilating as she looked at her spindly little body. As we rushed into the nearly dark bedroom where she had been left. She looked up at us, her eyes shining in terror from the hall light. “Who... who are you? What’s happened to me? Where am I?”

The questions spilled out in a rush, and I realized the fear on her face must have been similar to the expression on my face not long before. I had never been close to children, having none of my own and no younger siblings, but I found a strange bond of sympathy with the little waif Jess had become. I reached out instinctively as if to put a comforting arm around her, pushing a dark blonde strand of hair out of her face.

“Don’t touch me!” she screamed, pushing herself back helplessly on the bed as she tried to put some force into the comically childish voice she now had. In that moment, I realized there were indeed far worse things to be changed into than what I had become. I might be female, but I was an adult. Jess had become a weak, defenseless little girl, and while he had no idea how it had happened, his mind was now clear enough to know that he was completely powerless.

“Jess, it’s me—Grant,” I said as calmly as I could.

“Oh sure,” she mumbled. “And I suppose the guy next to you is Boop.”

“As a matter of fact...” he began, and I could almost hear the ironic smile in his voice.

“Jess, listen,” I said more sternly. “Think about it. If someone could

change you into a little girl, why is it so outlandish to think he couldn't do something similar to us?"

Her fearful defiance began to fade, replaced by a look of shock.

"Grant, is that really you? And Boop?"

"Come downstairs," I told her. "We'll explain everything."

We told her as much as we knew as she sat there on the living room couch next to us. Of course she had questions, but most of them would have to wait until Susan arrived with answers. She agreed to eat a little, though, and as we watched, she ate a toasted cheese sandwich and quaffed down two full glasses of milk. It was the most I had seen Jess eat in weeks.

"You have quite an appetite," I observed.

"I feel like I haven't eaten in weeks," she sighed. Then, looking at me, she asked, "Either of you guys got a smoke?"

I couldn't help it; I broke out laughing. And I wasn't the only one—Marty was laughing even louder than I was.

"What's so funny?" she asked, rather indignantly. Her demeanor was enough to start us laughing again.

"Look, Jess," Marty explained as he managed to catch his breath, "you're a little girl. I'd guess you're about six or so. What would you do if you saw a little girl ask for a smoke like that?"

She flushed. "But I'm not a little girl—not really."

"Oh, I'm afraid you are a little girl," I pointed out. "Your name is Kimberly Pearson and it looks as if you're our daughter."

"Yeah, right!"

There was a knock at the door which interrupted my next comment. Marty opened it and Susan Jager stepped in, still dressed casually as she had been in court that day. "Sorry to be so late," she apologized. "The Judge wanted to make sure I understood what I could tell you tonight."

“Why didn’t he just come himself?” I asked as Susan seated herself in a chair facing the couch where my ‘family’ had settled.

“The Judge limits his contacts with mortals,” she replied, as if that made sense. I suppose it did. Whatever The Judge was, he was not you run-of-the mill mortal—I was sure of that. But that would mean he was immortal—like... “A god?” I blurted out.

“Look,” Susan began, “you don’t know how lucky you are...”

Funny, I didn’t feel particularly lucky.

“What he’s authorized me to tell you usually takes people days or even weeks to figure out. But since your whole transformation got screwed up, he’s agreed to let me help you.”

“You mean we weren’t supposed to get changed into the Cleaver family?” Marty asked.

“More like the Simpsons,” I muttered, winning an angry glance from Homer—I mean Marty.

Susan shook her head. “No. Other transformations were in store for each of you tomorrow—transformations where you wouldn’t have to interact so much. But those roles won’t be available until tomorrow. The people you were due to be are all still out of town and...”

She looked back and forth at all three of us and sighed. “I’m sorry. I must be going too fast for you. Let me start at the beginning by explaining what’s going on here in Ovid.”

My mind was spinning as she told us the tale of a town created and run by gods straight out of classical mythology. If we had each been in our real bodies, I think we would have laughed her right out of the house, but we sensed the truth each time we looked at ourselves. Whatever had changed us into the Pearson family was as close to a god as anything I had ever seen. She didn’t name them individually, but I knew The Judge was Jupiter and the cop had to be Mercury given the similarity of names.

“So you’re saying these... gods created Ovid and changed us into this?” Marty asked.

“Exactly.”

“But why?” Marty and I asked together.

“That’s something I can’t tell you,” she said with a shake of her head.

“Now wait! Before you start badgering me, understand that what I mean is I don’t know the answer myself. Like you, I used to be someone else. The Judge and his associates don’t let me in on their plans as a rule.”

“So why are you telling us all of this?” Kimberly asked. All of us looked at her in surprise. We weren’t used to having a small child participate in such a conversation, and I think it took all of us just a moment to remember that the cute little waif seated between Marty and me was really as old as we were.

“Why?” she asked again. I felt a strange sense of pride in my transformed friend. Of all of us, his change was the most radical in both age and sex, yet as Kimberly, she showed a poise and maturity that outstripped her conduct as Jess. Once she had overcome the initial panic generated by her transformation, she seemed almost to accept what had been done to her.

Susan immediately accepted her question as she would have from a physical adult. I imagined she had seen other transformations of a similar or even worse nature. “Because until The Judge can sort all of this out, you’ll have to be the Pearson family and frankly, he’s not sure you’re up to the task. If it hadn’t been for your imminent death, Kimberly, four employees of the State Department of Agriculture slated to die in a car crash tomorrow would have become the Pearson family. Now The Judge has found other roles for them since the people you were supposed to be won’t be back in Ovid in time to make the switch. They’re on a field trip to Tulsa.”

“Sort of like airliners,” I mused. When I saw everyone looking at me with puzzled expressions, I explained, “If an airliner is late, its next destination sometimes needs to be changed while an earlier plane flies its route. Then that plane has to be given a new route and so on. One late plane can screw up flight operations all over the country.”

Susan nodded. "That's pretty much what's happened here. The problem is that the Pearsons are an important part of the development of Ovid, according to The Judge. We can't have anything happen to them and the next few days may be critical for them. As a result, The Judge decided that you should be told as much as possible so you could adapt more quickly to these roles, even if they're only temporary."

"Temporary?" we all asked at once.

"Here's the deal," Susan explained. "For the next week, you all do the best you can to be the Pearson family. To help you, I've told you who really runs Ovid, and The Judge has even allowed the three of you to talk freely among yourselves. Normally, only two can discuss the changes at any given time. When a third person joins in, only your new lives in Ovid can be discussed."

"You said three," Marty pointed out. "What about Gordy–Allie?"

"When people are transformed, not everyone remembers who he or she was before," Susan told us. "No one knows why. I'm not even sure The Judge knows why. Some of us think it's just too much for some people to take. Their minds snap and the unconscious abilities you inherit with the transformation to cope with your new lives become the active parts of your memory and personality, submerging or even erasing the personality that was there before."

"In other words," I suggested, "Gordy might still be in there but unable to overcome the Allie identity he's been given?"

"That's possible," Susan agreed. "Or it could be that Gordy's mind was changed as completely as his body. Now only Allie remains. She's just a normal, happy eight year old girl. The three of you are actually in the minority. Most people have no memory of their previous lives."

"That's horrible!" I said with a shudder, clenching my bare arms with my hands. "It's like murder."

"I agree," she replied, surprising us. After all, she was an insider. We would have expected her to support what The Judge had done.

“I agree it’s horrible,” she clarified, “but remember, The Judge only recruits new citizens from those who would otherwise die. Most of them go on to lead vibrant, productive lives here in Ovid with or without their previous memories. Think of it as a second chance. Most of them wouldn’t go back to their old lives even if they had the chance.”

“I find that hard to believe,” I snorted. “Maybe it’s okay for someone like Boop who likes girls anyhow and...”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Marty broke in. “You think I like having all this junk between my legs? I feel like I’m as big as the Goodyear blimp. And as for...”

“Enough!” Susan yelled, stopping us at once with the commanding presence of her voice. When we were quiet, she went on. “I don’t think the two of you understand what’s at stake here. The Judge needs this family to work together until he can sort things out. Allie’s no problem. She’ll just act as she should; she doesn’t know anything has changed. Kimberly, I don’t think you can cause too much trouble. Just act like the little girl you are and things will be fine. As for the two of you...”

A serious frown crossed her face as she looked at Marty and me. “As I’ve been given to understand, you two are important to The Judge’s plans—or at least the Pearsons are important to his plans. The Judge has authorized me to tell you that if you cooperate on this matter for the next week or so, he’ll find replacements for you and find other roles for you.”

“Other roles?” I said warily. I had been changed from a man into a young woman—a wife and mother. All it took was a look at Kimberly or Allie to know it could have been even worse. But any being—or god if you will—who could do all of this to us could do much worse if it amused him. And I seemed to remember from reading Greek myths as a child that the gods thoroughly enjoyed playing with the lives of mortals.

“The three of you will be teens again,” she explained, “and be given your original sexes. You’ll be classmates—reasonably good looking

and with your natural intelligence. You'll be free to become wherever your talents take you." She managed a thin smile. "Who knows? You may even decide to start a band."

"What about Gordy?" Marty asked.

"Sorry, but Gordy's gone. According to The Judge, there is no way to bring him back. Besides, she's happy as Allie. The Pearsons are good people and she'll have a good life. She just won't remember Gordy or anything about him."

I felt badly about leaving Gordy behind, but I supposed there was nothing to be done about it. Maybe he was the lucky one. Maybe whatever was Gordy was still there—unaware that she had ever been a man. I suppose Gordy was actually the most 'normal' of all of us, and the gypsy lifestyle of a down-on-its-luck rock band had probably deprived him of a normal life. I sometimes thought Gordy stayed with the band just for us. He was that kind of a person. I think if any of the rest of us had been asked to name the one member of the group we liked and trusted, it would have been Gordy—and probably only Gordy.

"I guess we don't have much of a choice," Marty muttered.

Susan shook her head. "No, you don't. Or at least you don't have any other good choices. Because let me warn you, if you screw this up, all bets are off. Have you ever heard the expression 'Wrath of the Gods'?"

I gulped as the three of us nodded nervously.

Susan nodded, too, as if an agreement as binding as any she had ever committed to paper had just been made. "All right then. I'll tell The Judge you've agreed to his proposal." She got up as if to leave.

"Wait!" I called, jumping up as well. "What are we supposed to do? How can we tell when we're doing this right?"

She waited until she was at the front door before turning to answer. "That is something I can't tell you because The Judge wouldn't tell me. He said he didn't want to make things too easy for you. You'll just have to figure it out for yourselves." And before we could respond, she

was out the door.

The three of us just stared at each other for a few moments. It was Marty who broke the ice at last. "Look, I say we find this Judge and try to reason with him."

"Just where do you figure we should look for him?" I retorted.

"Well, the courthouse might be a place to start."

I put my hands on my hips, then brought them down to my side when I realized how feminine the gesture looked. "If you were a god, would you hang around a small town courthouse at night?"

"And you've got a better idea?"

"Yeah, we do what our lawyer says," I told him.

"You expect us to act like... like..." Kimberly started.

"Like a family," I finished for her.

"Sure, that's easy for you," she muttered. "You get to be the mommy. And Boop gets to be the daddy. Look at what I get to be!"

Marty and I actually traded thin smiles. In a way, Jess was responsible for the screw-up. If he hadn't been on the verge of dying from a drug overdose, we wouldn't be in quite this fix. It served him right to have the worst role in all this. Maybe a week as a cute little girl would do him some good. I couldn't resist getting back at him.

"You get to be Mommy's little sweetheart," I cooed, grabbing her and planting a sloppy but motherly kiss on her smooth cheek. She was too flabbergasted to try to stop me. For that matter, she was too small to stop me even if she hadn't been flabbergasted.

"What do you think you're doing?" she sputtered as I released her. A small hand went up to brush the kiss away, but she succeeded only in smearing the faint blemish of lipstick I had left on her.

Marty laughed and got into the spirit of the game. "What's the matter, Princess? Don't you love Mommy and Daddy?"

Her childish blue eyes narrowed in an uncharacteristically adult

expression. “Oh I get it. You guys think you’re cute, huh? Well if you think it’s so much fun playing your parts, wait until you have to come to school to get me out of detention for causing trouble in class. Won’t that be fun?”

“Okay,” I laughed, although it sounded suspiciously like a giggle. “Don’t worry. We won’t lord it over you. But think about it, guys. If we play along, we’ll only be stuck this way for a week or so. But if we mess things up, we may be stuck like this for the rest of our lives. If I can handle being Susie Homemaker for that long, you guys can do your part. Then after The Judge sorts all of this out, we’ll be out of here. If we do a good job, maybe he’ll cut us some slack. He might even let us leave Ovid.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” Marty snorted. “We’re stuck here. As far as the world knows, we’re dead—or maybe we never even existed.”

“Maybe,” I had to agree. “And you’re right. I don’t think he’d let us leave Ovid. But do you guys want to spend the rest of our lives together like this?”

Everyone was silent. It confirmed the unsaid problem we’d had for a long time. We were all absolutely sick of each other. I didn’t want to be a woman, but I particularly didn’t want to be Boop’s wife and Jess’s mother. Anything had to be better than that.

“Okay,” Kimberly sighed at last. “So what time do I go to school tomorrow? I’m in—what—the first grade?”

We all looked at each other with the sudden realization that we still didn’t know that much about ourselves. Where did we work? Or was I a stay-at-home mom? Where did the girls go to school? Who were our friends? It only took a few moments for us to all burst into action, scouring the house for clues.

Fortunately, it didn’t take long. Employee ID’s, correspondence, phone lists, and an assortment of other documents gave us enough to get started. Marty was an insurance agent—a revelation which made him groan. Boop’s father had been an insurance agent, so Marty knew

what the job entailed—not that he liked the idea very much. I was apparently a secretary in the English Department at some place called Capta College. Great. I had always been lousy at paperwork and as for typing, forget it. Kimberly, as she had suspected, was a first grader.

“Oh fine,” she muttered. “I get to learn to read again.”

“Be sure and let me know how Dick and Jane turns out,” Marty quipped, earning a very ugly look from a very young girl.

“Look, if our attorney is right, this is all temporary,” I reminded them. “Let’s try to do what The Judge wants us to do and maybe things will get better.”

“Well they certainly couldn’t get much worse,” Kimberly muttered.

Before I could answer that, there was a knock at the door. I hurried over to the door thinking that Susan must have something else for us, so I was a little surprised when I saw Allie and a cute little blonde girl about her size standing there. Behind them was the blonde woman I had seen in the courtroom during our trial. “Hi,” she said with a pleasant smile. “How are you, Donna?”

“Come on up to my room!” Allie chirped.

“Okay!” the other girl replied, and before she knew what was happening, they had each grabbed one of Kimberly’s arms and were leading her upstairs as she looked back at me with alarm.

“Let’s talk for a minute,” the woman said, motioning that I should step outside and close the door. Marty looked curious but didn’t follow.

“You were there in the courtroom today when we were transformed,” I said when we were alone.

“Yes,” she agreed. “And I know how hard this must be for all of you. I’m Cindy Patton, by the way. We live just down the street—it’s the two story down there with the dark truck in the driveway. We’re supposed to be friends since our daughters play together and are in Brownies together.”

“How suburban,” I drawled in the soft Oklahoma accent we all seemed to have.

Cindy looked at me carefully. “Look, Donna,” she cautioned, “whether you know it or not, you’re still on trial. If you guys screw this up, there’ll be hell to pay.”

“Our attorney has made that clear,” I told her. “Don’t worry, we’ll be good. I suppose you know what this whole Ovid thing is all about.”

“Actually I don’t know as much as you think,” she replied. “I can make an educated guess, though. The Judge and his... associates seem to have knowledge of the future. Something bad is coming down—something so bad we can’t even imagine it. I think The Judge has a plan to stop it. That’s why he’s probably not going to cut you any slack. If he thinks you and your friends are important to the outcome of his plan, you can expect him to demand results.

“Now since we’re supposed to be friends, come down or call me any time. I’ll try to help you any way I can.”

“Start by telling me just what this Judge of yours is up to,” I suggested. “What exactly is his plan?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. None of us do.”

“But just what is my part?” I demanded. “What the hell are we supposed to do?”

She gave me an enigmatic smile. “The best you can.”

Before I could press her further, she opened the door and called, “Michelle! Time to go home.”

“Do I hafta?” a sweet little voice called sadly from upstairs.

“You have school tomorrow. Come on!”

Michelle and Ally reluctantly looked over the banister, and with them, I saw something that almost made me choke with laughter. They had piled Kimberly’s hair up high on her head in an attempt at creating an elegant hairdo. Kimberly didn’t look very happy about it, but one of the other girls would have been more than a match for her. It was

probably a good thing we hadn't talked long. If they had had more time, I think the other girls would have done far more than just her hair.

Cindy gave me a mischievous smile. "Girls will be girls," she said.

"And apparently so will boys," I returned, causing her to smile even wider.

"Damn girls!" Kimberly muttered moments later as I managed to pull out the seemingly endless clips and pins the girls had managed to put in her hair in just a few minutes. We were in her room—a veritable cliché of a young girl's room, complete with white painted furniture trimmed in painted pink flowers, a girl-sized four-poster bed, and even a little dressing table, complete with a frilly little lace skirt around the edge of the table. Of course, there was an assortment of dolls and stuffed toys everywhere I looked as well. It was going to be bad enough being a woman, but I found myself very thankful that I had been changed into one instead of a little girl as Jess had been.

"Just be good and play your part," I reminded her. "Maybe we'll get out of this."

"Yeah," she growled—or as close to as a six-year-old girl can come to growling. "But we'll just get changed into someone else."

"We don't need to worry about that right now," I told her and was surprised to see her look at me quizzically. "What's wrong?"

"It's what you just said," she explained as she took off her shoes. "You sounded just like my mother."

I flushed in embarrassment. "Well, I'm not."

"But you said we had to play our parts," she reminded me slyly.

"Yes, but..."

She jumped up and grabbed me around the waist. "Oh Mommy! Get me some jammies. I want to get ready for bed now." Her voice was high and sweet, and I knew she was teasing me. But I wasn't going to let her get me. If she wanted to act the part as a joke, I could play

along.

“All right, sweetheart,” I cooed as I gave her a motherly hug. “Let’s find something soft and snuggly for you.”

I reached into the second drawer of her dresser and pulled out some white pajamas with little red hearts all over them and a strip of red lace around the collar. “You’re giving me that look again. What’s wrong now?”

She pointed at the pajamas in my hand. “How... how did you know where those were? You reached in the drawer as if you knew exactly where they were.”

I was shocked. Actually, I had no idea how I had know. I hadn’t really thought about it; I had just acted. Still, I managed to shrug and say, “Beginner’s luck, I guess.” I didn’t tell her about Marty’s similar experience in the kitchen.

But later as I joined Marty in the den, I had had a chance to think about what had happened. I had even experimented a little in my own room, finding my own clothing in the drawers without a thought. It seemed as if not just our bodies had been transformed. We had been gifted with something almost akin to instinctive behavior. I wondered if all newcomers to Ovid received similar gifts or if this was another example of our unconventional treatment. I suspected all newcomers were given the unconscious abilities or life in Ovid would have been chaotic.

“The girls in bed?” Marty asked, half-asleep on the couch as the TV droned softly in the background.

“The girls?” I asked sitting down beside him.

Before I could think about it, he put his arm around me and snuggled up against me. “Marty! What the hell do you think you’re doing?” As I yelled at him, I jumped up off the couch, terrified.

“Huh? What?” he mumbled as if coming out of a trance.

“You had your hand on my boo... I mean, uh, my...”

He laughed in spite of his confusion. "Are you trying to say breast?"

I reddened in embarrassment. Like most single men, I had developed the bad habit of using boobs, tits, rack—you name it—to describe a woman's breasts. However, now that I had a pair of my very own, it seemed somehow wrong to verbally debase my own anatomy with those terms, any more than I could call what was now between my legs all the sordid names I had learned through my years as a male.

"Yes!" I managed at last. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I really didn't think about it," he admitted, as if realizing it himself for the first time. "I was just sitting here, zoning out in front of the television, and when you sat down next to me, it was as if it was some sort of autonomic reaction."

I thought about how I had found Kimberly's pajamas without thinking about them. "Oh Marty, I'm worried. I think maybe The Judge did something besides change our bodies."

"Like how?"

"I'd rather show you," I told him.

"And how are you going to do that?"

"Just sit there and watch TV," I told him. "Try not to think about anything."

I sat next to him, a little nervously. I wanted to see for myself if I was right, and this was the best way I could think of to explain to Marty and satisfy my own curiosity at the same time. I just hoped I could gain some semblance of control during the experiment, but the... whatever it was had only lasted a few moments in Kimberly's room.

I watched the images on the TV screen, not really paying any attention to them. It was a local news program out of Tulsa, and I did hear the newsreader say something about the tornado we had encountered earlier, but apparently there were no casualties. Ha! That showed what they knew.

The words seemed to drift into indistinct mumbles, and the images on

the screen were no more than dancing patterns of light as I drifted off a little snuggling against Marty's warm body, enjoying the feel of his hand kneading my breast as I methodically unzipped his pants and felt his growing manhood with my small hand and...

Oh... no!

I sat bolt upright, practically bruising my breast as I jumped away from Marty's hand. Marty was looking at me with shock and something resembling pain. No wonder. The boner in his pants was absolutely enormous, and my lips had been inches away from it.

"Jesus!" he gasped.

"See what I mean?" I asked him, suddenly aware that my voice had a smoking, yearning quality to it. I realized also that my nipples were tingling, and something felt warm and wet between my legs.

"You mean if we don't think about it, we have... I mean we do... I mean we want sex?"

"Not exactly." I explained to him what had happened in Kimberly's room and told him what I had concluded.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean we might become just like Allie?"

"I don't think so," I replied slowly. "I doubt if it gets any worse, but it's like having a minor case of what she has. Maybe in Allie's case, the shock of being transformed was so great that she got lost in this... what did you call it? Oh yes, in this autonomic reaction. We seem to be able to recover from it."

"So far," he grumbled, looking down at where his pants were still unzipped. "So what do I do about...?"

"Little Marty?" I finished for him, even managing to grin.

"Funny."

I shrugged. "Give it a little while. It'll go down so long as you don't stimulate it anymore."

“It’s damned painful this way,” he said, shifting uncomfortably on the couch as he tried without success to stuff the woody back into his pants. “Isn’t there another way?”

“Well you could always take a Playboy into the bathroom and whack off.”

“No thank you!” he huffed. But he did leave the room and headed for the bedroom.

Of course, there was another way to solve his problem, but I didn’t want to think about that. Technically, we were husband and wife. If we had taken our actions to their normal conclusion, we’d be in bed together by now. But I didn’t want to think about that. It was too weird to think about being a woman involved in a sexual act with a man. In spite of the messages my body was sending out, I was still mentally male and the idea of having sex with a man just didn’t seem right.

But what if having sex with Marty was part of what was required to get us out of this mess? Susan hadn’t given me any clue about that. She and Cindy had both told me to play my part. But just what was my part? If I cooperated, I had The Judge’s promise through Susan that I’d be changed into a teenager—a male teenager—and have a new life. But did that mean spreading my legs for Marty? Could I do that—even to earn a change back into a male body? I just hoped it didn’t come to that.

When Marty came back into the den, he was wearing blue and white striped pajamas and holding a pillow and blanket. “I assume you want me to sleep down here.”

I couldn’t help it; I laughed. Well, I suppose it was more of a giggle actually.

“What’s so damned funny?” he demanded.

“You look like something out of a fifties sitcom,” I told him, barely able to talk.

He looked down at himself with a frown, and then to my surprise began to laugh himself. It was the first time since our transformation

that either of us had found anything to laugh about. It felt good to laugh, and in a strange way, it felt good to hear Marty's deep laugh.

"Okay, Lucy," he said in a very poor Cuban accent, "so what do we do now?"

"Well," I told him, finally able to contain myself, "it's a king-size bed. I think it's probably big enough for both of us. Besides, if we don't share the bed, Allie might wonder what's wrong."

"You're not afraid that I'll jump you in the middle of the night?"

"I think you'll be able to restrain yourself," I replied in a very demure fashion.

"Do you need my help getting ready for bed?"

"What?"

He shrugged. "I just mean getting ready for bed as a woman."

"What's so different about that?" I asked, my suspicion returning.

"Oh, removing your makeup, getting your hair fixed so you don't wake up looking like Raggedy Ann in the morning—that sort of stuff."

I thought for a moment. I suppose for a woman being changed into a man, little things like getting ready for bed would be easy. Just brush teeth, drain the snake, strip down to shorts or throw on some pajamas, and hit the sack. For a woman, though, it was a more involved process, as was getting ready in the morning. I suspected I could let myself go on automatic and get ready for bed, but what if while on automatic, I decided to slip into something short and sexy and turn my new hubby on? A little help might be a better decision.

"Okay," I agreed, "but no funny stuff."

"Wouldn't dream of it!" he replied with mock indignation as he held his hands up.

I have to admit, his help was beneficial. He showed me how to clean off the makeup, helped me remove my earrings, and even brushed and braided my hair for me, explaining everything as he went. He had

even found a pair of women's pajamas for me to wear. They were soft and silky, in a sort of baby blue color. As I sat there letting him brush my hair, I felt a lot of the day's tension slip away. Maybe I could make it through this after all.

A good night kiss would have been too much for us, but we did squeeze each other's hand and manage a small, almost shy smile for each other. We slipped between the covers, each settling for a position on our side so we wouldn't have to face each other. I could almost imagine that I was sleeping by myself.

Lying there in the dark, though, I did start to wonder once more exactly what was expected of us. Normal married couples were intimate in bed. Marty and Donna Lou Pearson had probably conceived both girls in this very bed—or so they would have if they were real people. What would it be like...?

No! That was a dangerous thought. I was a man, and if everything went right, I would be again. Okay, I'd be a teenager—little more than a boy—but I'd be male again if our attorney had told us the truth. All I had to do was get through the next few days and I'd be male again. We'd all be male—except for Marty, of course. I imagined she wanted to be female again just as much as we wanted to be male. Just a few more days, I thought as I drifted off, just a few more days...

It took a few moments the next morning to remember what had happened. The radio alarm had gone off, and I was jarred awake by an old Led Zeppelin song on an oldies station in Tulsa. Lying there as the memories of transformation sifted into my tired brain, I remembered back when we had been on the same stage with Robert Plant's group. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Hell, it was a lifetime ago, I realized.

Marty was just getting out of the shower as I sat up in bed. He just had a towel wrapped around his body, and he'd done it all wrong.

"You know you don't have to hide your nipples anymore," I pointed out.

Embarrassed, he let the towel slip a little bit. "Old habits die hard," he

muttered.

“Why not just go on automatic?” I asked him. “That’s what I’m going to do.”

“Uh... I was afraid I might...” he began. “I mean, I woke up with... uh...”

I laughed, “You woke up with a woody, didn’t you?”

He turned as red as Rudolph’s nose. “I wasn’t sure what to do.”

That’s what Marty got for preferring women when he was Boop. She had never awakened to find her boyfriend’s member at full attention before. But it seemed to be gone now, so he must have gotten it figured out. I was still chuckling as I grabbed a bra and panties and headed in for my own shower.

I wasn’t laughing a few minutes later. I hadn’t relaxed to let the autonomic reactions take over as I started my shower. That was probably a mistake. I found myself unsettled by the feel of water on my smooth, feminine body. I hadn’t expected my nipples to rise so spectacularly in the warm water, and the feeling of water running between my legs was a source of mild but obvious stimulation. It was then that I remembered that a man’s sexuality is concentrated between his legs, but with a woman, the sensual feelings are more general and non-specific. My body felt good... incredibly good. I was beginning to wonder if women managed to have orgasms just taking showers. No wonder many women liked bubble baths. The feeling on their skin—our skin—must be incredible, I thought.

I did go on automatic once out of the shower. It wasn’t that hard to do, as relaxed as I was from the shower. Before I knew it, my hair was dry and combed out and my makeup was on, tastefully done to give me that Young Professional Woman look. My choice of attire—again automatically determined—was of some concern though. The tan skirt looked a little tight and short and the blouse I wore seemed just a little filmy and was cut just a little low, but no worse than what I had seen on any number of secretaries.

Marty had gotten the girls up. It was funny how quickly I had come to think of them as ‘the girls.’ I suppose since they looked nothing like Gordy and Jess, it was a little hard to think of them in any other way. The converse was probably true, too. Allie, of course, thought of me as her mother because she knew no better. As for Kimberly, it was hard to say. She was playing her part as best she could, even acceding to Allie’s advice and help as she got ready to face the rigors of first grade. I guess she thought of me as her mother because it was easier to think that way than to think about who we had been. Strangely though, she seemed a little different—more juvenile—but I suppose that was because she was going on automatic part of the time, too.

The whole morning scene just seemed so disturbingly domestic. Juice, cereal, coffee, fruit and milk got passed around as each of us wandered into the kitchen, grabbed something to eat, then cleaned up and left. As *Interossiter*, we had actually done the same thing more than once, staying in a suite where we shared breakfast in a similar fashion. Those had been the good days for the band—days in which we were on top and subsequently got along.

“Well, I’m off,” Marty announced, folding the morning copy of the *Tulsa World* on the kitchen table. “I have insurance to sell.” He didn’t sound very pleased at the prospect.

“Have a wonderful day, dear,” I sang, giving him a sweet smile. It was worth it just to watch the scowl on his face. I had to say, it was nice to know the former Boop was every bit as disturbed as I was. If I’d thought for a moment that Marty was happy with his lot, I would have fumed at my desk all day.

I guess I just wasn’t too enthusiastic about spending a boring day as a secretary, typing at a terminal and fetching coffee all day. I had really never had a mundane job—if you didn’t count the grunt jobs I had worked at while the band got established. And even though things hadn’t exactly been cherry for the band in recent years, we’d managed to get by without soiling our hands.

“We’d better hurry, Kimberly,” Allie said primly as she wiped her little

mouth. "The school bus will be here shortly."

Kimberly gave me a 'what else can I do?' roll of her eyes as she dutifully followed her new sister to get ready for school.

Maybe I had the best of it when you got right down to it, I thought as I finished my coffee. Selling insurance didn't sound like any fun at all, and going back to elementary school as a helpless little girl wasn't much to look forward to either. At least it was temporary, I reminded myself. All we had to do was keep our noses clean and we'd be changed into something more palatable.

"Bye Mom!" Allie said brightly, surprising me as she rushed up to plant a warm kiss on my cheek.

"Yeah, bye Mom!" Kimberly echoed as she kissed me too with a devilish look on her little face.

In spite of myself I laughed as they hurried out the door.

Capta College was like something out of Goodbye Mr. Chips. Mismatched stone and brick buildings covered in ivy and shaded by large oak and maple trees were spread across an expanse of grass punctuated by shrubs of all sizes and descriptions. I had to admit the campus looked much more like the traditional college campus than Arizona State where all of us had gone to school. The Tempe campus with its modern buildings and heat-seared vegetation was much larger than Capta College but not nearly as pleasing to the eye.

I had no trouble finding my office. After all, the strange automatic pilot that all of us had been given allowed us to function as if we'd been born to these lives. I was becoming less worried that it would somehow cause us to lose all memories of our previous lives but still tried to use it only for short periods of time, like finding where to park and what building to go to.

The English Department was on the second floor of Attica Hall. All the buildings seemed to be named after parts of ancient Greece. In addition to Attica Hall, I noticed Sparta Gymnasium, Corinth Hall, Delphi Science, and Thebes Manor, which seemed to be the main

administration building. Oh, there was also the Homer Memorial Library, but I thought it was probably named for some wealthy alumnus named Homer who had paid for the place.

Attica Hall was well kept, in spite of its age. Tile floors designed to look like marble were polished to a high gloss, in spite of the morning traffic of Capta's student body on its way to class. The oak wainscoting smelled of polish, but somehow it seemed to bring out the odor of the original wood as well.

I had never worked in an office before—well, at least not for any length of time. But I had certainly been in my share of offices. When I walked into the small suite of offices that would be my new workplace, I was pleasantly surprised to find them warm and inviting. My office was really a reception area, with a row of small offices surrounding me on three sides. I was apparently the first person in the office that morning, so it gave me an opportunity to look around and see what I could find out about the inhabitants of the offices.

It was obvious to me that I would be the low person on the totem pole. All the offices were inhabited by professors and instructors. Nameplates were in evidence, which would help me learn their names. The Department Chairman—judging by the fact that he had the largest office—was Professor Thurmond. His office was neat and orderly, but it was casual as well with personal mementos and pictures gracing the shelves. From the person in the pictures I was certain was Professor Thurmond, I could see a man who enjoyed life. The shots were taken deep-sea fishing, skiing, and even mountain climbing. A different girl was with him in each of the pictures. The only thing each of the girls had in common was that Professor Thurmond's arm was around their narrow waists. He was an attractive man, I began to realize, with dark hair just starting to gray and the weathered complexion of a man who spent a lot of time outdoors.

Of the others with offices, one caught my attention: Dr. Steve Jager. It was an unusual last name and also the name of our attorney. Were they related? Given how unusual their last name was, I wouldn't have been surprised to find out they were married. Did that mean that Dr.

Jager would be closely observing me and reporting back to his wife who would in turn be reporting to The Judge regarding my conduct?

None of the other names meant anything to me so I settled down at my desk so try to figure out what my job was all about. There was an 'in' basket, so that seemed to be the logical place to start. But before I could even start on the first item, she walked in.

She... Eunice... the girl from college all those years ago. And she hadn't changed. Oh, she was a little older, but not as old as I would have expected. Her hair was still a perfect shade of blonde, and even the tight knot she had tied it into couldn't disguise the glimmering richness of it. Her skin was soft and flawless, and her eyes still the perfect blue, even hidden behind small feminine glasses. As for her figure, the conservative tan skirt and white silk blouse clung softly to her curves, accentuating rather than hiding her beauty.

Looking up from the papers she was carrying, she smiled. "Good morning, Donna."

"Eunice..." the word just spilled out of my mouth without a thought as I rose to my feet.

"Eunice?" she asked, puzzled. Then a look of understanding crossed her face. "Oh yes, she does use that name sometimes. You're talking about one of my sisters."

"Sisters?" I knew I was sounding dull-witted, but what could I do? This wasn't Eunice? And what did she mean when she said Eunice was a name her sister used sometimes?

"Yes," she confirmed. "Oh, that's right. You're new here."

"No!" I said hurriedly, afraid my masquerade had been discovered. What would that mean to our assignment? "I... I work here. I'm..."

"Yes, Donna Lou Pearson," she broke in with a wave of her hand as she laughed. "You're our departmental assistant." She pointed at a door to one of the other offices. "I'm Dr. Musetti—Polly Musetti. I teach creative writing and a few other English courses." She looked at me. Her face was serious but her eyes continued to laugh. "But you knew

that, didn't you, Donna? After all, you've worked here for more than five years."

She knew! She knew I was not really Donna Lou Pearson, and yet she seemed willing to play along. It meant she knew of The Judge's work. Now I had at least two professors to worry about in the department—or perhaps more. Did everyone in the department know?

"Good morning, Donna."

I wanted to ask Polly Musetti some questions, but I was interrupted by a cheerful male voice. Turning, I saw the man whose pictures I had observed in his office—my boss, Professor Thurmond. He was handsome and poised, just like in his pictures. Also, he looked as solid as I was, not like the transparent majority I had experienced as I had walked to the office that morning. "Oh! Good morning..." What did Donna call him? "... sir."

He raised an eyebrow slightly—just enough to let me know I had just screwed up. Apparently things were pretty informal in the department. What was his first name? John? Jack? No, Jerry. I'd have to remember to call him Jerry.

"Are those reports for the dean ready yet?" he asked.

Of course, I had no idea what reports he was talking about. "Almost," I lied. It seemed to be a good enough answer. He nodded and disappeared into his office, closing the door behind him.

"Don't worry, he didn't really notice your mistake," Polly told me as she picked up a folder from her desk and started back toward the door.

"Wait, please!" I blurted out. "I have some questions for you."

"Later, perhaps," she replied. "Right now, I'm late for a class."

And she was gone. I was beginning to feel more and more like Alice in Wonderland. Every time I seemed to find someone who could help me, he or she disappeared like the Cheshire Cat, leaving me with more questions than answers.

As Polly had left, another person entered, briefcase in hand. He was

tall—or at least he seemed tall to me given my diminished stature—with brown hair and brown eyes. My newly feminized body seemed to react with a little tingle that probably meant it found him attractive, and I suppose he was. “Good morning, Donna,” he said cheerfully.

I didn’t know how to respond to him, but he helped me out. “Call me Steve,” he said softly as he brushed past me.

“Uh... good morning, Steve.” As I stood there stupidly, he unlocked the office of Professor Jager and stepped in. “Later,” he whispered back to me. So with that I knew he was related to our attorney and knew exactly who I was. Did everyone know? God, I hoped not!

“Donna, I need you!” Professor Thurmond–Jerry–called out. At least he had made no indication that he knew that I was really a man. Yeah, a man. There I stood in my tan skirt and heels thinking of myself as a man. I don’t think so.

“Yes... Jerry?” I managed as I stepped into his office, but to my surprise, he wasn’t at his desk. With a start, I heard the door close behind me. I turned and saw my new boss standing there with a hungry look in his eyes. Before I could react, he grabbed me and pulled me into his embrace. I knew what was coming next, but I had no way of preventing it without ‘blowing my cover.’ I let myself be kissed by a man for the first time in my new life.

Strangely, I didn’t find it unpleasant. His breath was fresh and there was not even a tiny trace of stubble on his face. I’d have to find out what sort of razor he used if I ever managed to become male again. His kiss was demanding but not brutal, and I actually found myself returning it. Worse yet, I also found my nipples rising uncomfortably inside my bra and a distinct dampness between my legs. No, this wasn’t right...

He broke the kiss, a puzzled look on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Uh...” Think fast, man. “Uh... Steve... Professor Jager is in his office. He’ll hear us.”

“Damn! I didn’t hear him come in.” Jerry broke the embrace and

quickly opened his door. "He has a class in forty-five minutes," he said. "We can... continue then."

I nodded as I left, but I knew I had to find something to get me out of the office in forty-five minutes or else.

I was shaken as I returned to my desk. The way Jerry had acted, this wasn't the first time Donna had been in a compromising position with him. Were they having an affair? Probably. Susan had told us that if we ever wanted to be changed back into something more familiar, we'd have to act like the Pearson family was supposed to act. But what did that mean? Did it mean we had to be the all-American family, loving and sweet, or did it mean we had to act the way the Pearson family had normally been acting—including the affair with my boss.

To make matters worse, I was just a little bit stimulated. It was embarrassing, but I kept telling myself it was something I had little or no control over. After all, as a man, if a pretty girl had walked up to me and rubbed her body against mine, her lips on my lips, I would have gotten hard as a rock. Could I expect anything less than the female equivalent of that when an obviously attractive and virile man like Jerry Thurmond made similar moves on my new body?

But did that mean I was turning gay? Oh, of course it didn't. I was a woman now, wasn't I? It wasn't 'gay' to be attracted to a man. I suppose instead it would have been gay if I wasn't attracted to men. If I had to, I supposed I could actually go a lot further with Jerry. It might even be pleasant. But I wouldn't be doing it to be pleasant. I'd just be doing it to get a male body again, wouldn't I? I just hoped he didn't expect a blowjob. The thought of giving a blowjob to a man was just too much for me to contemplate.

I had to know more about my relationship with Jerry, but how could I find out? Then out of the confused fog I found myself in, I heard Steve on the phone, talking to his wife—and he called her Susan! So I had been right. I waited impatiently until he got off the phone and decided to see what Steve knew about my relationship with Jerry. After all, even as careful as Jerry was trying to be, I was certain that an office romance would have been noticed by the other professors.

I tapped on Steve's door. He was hard at work grading what appeared to be essays. "Got a minute?"

He looked up and grinned. "For a newbie? Sure."

I closed his door behind me. "You're Susan's husband, right?"

"Got it in one."

I sat down, remembering only at the last minute to keep my skirt from hiking up. "Sorry," I mumbled, flushing. "I'm not used to... to..."

"Skirts?" he asked with a playful leer. "Don't worry. They'll become second nature to you. Susan had trouble with them at first, too."

"Susan was a man?" I blurted out. How could someone as poised and as... well, as feminine as Susan have ever have been a man?

Steve nodded. "Right again. And for the record, I was a woman."

"What is it with these sex changes?" I wondered out loud, but Steve had an answer for me.

"No one knows for sure. I've got a theory, though. I think a lot of people would repeat their mistakes if given a body of their birth sex. A new sex gives you a different perspective. You tend to strike out in new directions and not make the same errors. It almost makes me wonder if a large number of us are born the wrong sex to begin with and just never realize it. I know I'm far happier now than I ever was before I came here."

"Sure," I replied, "but you got changed into a man."

His eyes twinkled in amusement. "So you think men have it easier?"

"I don't seem to remember wearing lipstick and perfume and taking twenty minutes just to fix my hair when I was a man."

"Strangely, those are things I miss sometimes," he admitted. "I suppose I could try cross dressing, but it just doesn't seem like a good idea. Besides, Susan's not exactly my size. I will admit, though, that what I don't miss are the periods."

I shuddered at that. That was one thing I tried to keep out of my mind.

Besides, if everything went well, I'd be out of this body before that became an issue—or at least I hoped I would.

"Don't worry, though," he continued when he noted my discomfort. "One of the blessings of Ovid is you're given a couple of months to get used to all this before you have a period. I think it's done that way to make you more comfortable with your new body before the nasty stuff starts. And also a lot of new women aren't used to protecting themselves from pregnancy, so the lull in periods keeps that from being an issue."

"That's sort of why I came in here," I began slowly. "No, nothing like that!" I added when I saw the alarm in his eyes. I think he was afraid I wanted to try out my new body with him. What a thought! "I just want to know—are Professor Thurmond and Donna... are they...?"

"Having an affair?" he finished for me as he leaned back in his chair. "In a word, yes."

I dropped my eyes, silently cursing. That was all I needed. "I was afraid of that."

"But you don't have to continue it," he pointed out.

"But I may have to," I countered. "Did Susan tell you the deal The Judge offered?"

"Susan told me a little of it," he said cautiously. I had a sneaky hunch she had told him more than just a little of it.

"Then you see my dilemma," I continued. "I'm supposed to act as Donna acts, but does that mean I act as she has in the past or as The Judge wants her—me—to."

Steve folded his hands and leaned back in his chair pensively. "I see your problem," he said slowly. "I can tell you that Ovid is sort of a small town off an old *Saturday Evening Post* cover in many ways. That would indicate that family values apply."

"But..."

"What?" he asked.

“There was an unsaid ‘but’ at the end of your statement,” I pointed out grimly.

He nodded. “You’re right; there was. It may be hard to say with the prohibitions on discussing certain subjects. I guess I could say that The Judge had something of a reputation of being a philanderer at one time.”

I nodded as well. I wasn’t exactly an expert on mythological characters, but I remembered enough from my readings to recall that Jupiter had a number of affairs. Maybe a couple of thousand years had changed all of that. After all, the older many people got, the more straight-laced they became. But did that apply to gods as well?

“Still, I’d probably go with the conservative approach,” Steve mused.

“Are you giving me a hint from something you know or just advice?” I asked pointedly.

“Just advice, I’m afraid,” he sighed. “I came here just like you did. I don’t have any special knowledge.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “Even given who your wife is?”

“She got here just like the rest of us,” he explained. “She has a job just like you and I do. If you think she tells me whatever great secrets Ovid holds during pillow talk, think again. She probably has more insights than most of us do, but The Judge doesn’t trust his secrets with anyone who isn’t a... who isn’t like him.”

“Donna, are you in there?”

I jumped as Professor Thurmond’s voice blared through the intercom. “Uh... yes.”

“I just got called over to the Dean’s office. I won’t be back until about two.”

I gave a silent sigh of relief. That meant he wouldn’t be there for whatever he had planned for me after Steve left for class. Now I knew how a condemned prisoner felt when the call from the governor came through.

My reprieve was just that, though, and not a pardon. Professor Thurmond made it back to the office at a quarter after two. I had gotten so involved trying to learn my job and remember the names of the various instructors and students who flitted in and out of the office all day that I lost track of the time. Now, there I was at my desk, alone in the office except for Professor Thurmond. It was put up or shut up time. Or maybe I should say it was put out and shut up time instead.

“Donna, would you step in my office for a moment please?”

I wondered if the Romans had been so polite when they asked the Christians to face the lions in the Coliseum. Probably not.

I tried to tell myself that he wouldn't try much in his office. After all, students might still stray in and out, and even though all of the staff seemed to have a class at that hour, several of them would be back when the class ended. Besides, the phone might ring. Come to think of it, how the hell had Donna and Professor Thurmond carried on an affair in the fishbowl that was the English Department office?

But as I stepped into his office, I felt just a twinge of something I had experienced only once before. That morning in his office, I had felt a strange dampness between my legs and a tingle in my nipples. I had chalked it up to nervousness but now I knew it was something else: anticipation.

Yes, I know I had been a woman for only a day, and my mind was still as male as it ever had been—mostly. The problem was that my body was not male in any way, and it anticipated a loving embrace just as my missing male member might become fully erect anticipating a tryst with a lovely woman. In other words, I had no control over what it was doing. I tried to think about unsexy things, but it was a little difficult with Professor Thurmond—Jerry—standing there by the door undressing me with his large brown eyes.

He closed the door, and I'm sure it was only my imagination that made it sound as if it had closed with a metallic clang. He wasted no time, crushing my body to his and attacking my lips. So for the second time that day, I found myself being kissed by my boss. This time, though, I

knew what to expect. When I felt his tongue in my mouth, I didn't recoil as I might have earlier. The strange dampness and tingling were becoming more insistent, and I found my crazed mind wondering what it might be like...

He broke the kiss. "God, I missed you today," he breathed.

"I... missed you, too," I replied, trying to play along. I still hadn't decided how to accomplish my portrayal of Donna, so until I did, I felt I had to play her as she must have been playing herself. Strangely, it wasn't that difficult.

"I can't wait for Saturday morning," he told me, causing me to wonder what was happening Saturday morning that I didn't know about. It was already Friday, so that meant whatever was happening was happening tomorrow.

"Me, too," I lied.

"I can only stay here for a few minutes," he explained, holding me tighter again. "The damned Dean wants every department head at a cocktail party at the President's house this afternoon. I wish I could take you with me..."

I didn't say anything, but I wished I could thank the Dean and the President personally. I might have been just changed into a woman, but I was rapidly becoming a prisoner of desires that seemed to be built into my new body. I only hoped The Judge got a replacement for me quickly or I'd be a psychological mess by the time I got a male body again. It was indeed humbling to find out how much sexual desire is determined by the body instead of the mind.

Oh God! He suddenly put his hand under my skirt. Rubbing the palm of his hand over the front of my panties, I felt a sudden warm sensation run through my body. Had I just had a minor orgasm? If so, what was this new body capable of? A full-blown orgasm might be enough to give me a stroke.

"I'll see you in the morning," he promised, his hand slipping away. I was both relieved and disappointed in exactly the same instant. "Got

to go.”

So I had that to think about for the rest of the afternoon. A look at my calendar informed me that I had agreed to come in on a Saturday morning to help Professor Thurmond with budgeting for the next year. It all looked very proper. After all, there it was on my calendar. But there was no doubt in my mind that the Saturday budget planning session would never happen. Instead, I'd be expected to put out for my boss.

Did this mean there was a serious relationship between me and Professor Thurmond or was this just an extreme case of sexual harassment? I suspected it was the former. Surely the latter would never have turned me on the way his touch had managed to excite me. That is unless my new body was easily turned on. Either way, I had a problem. I had no intention of showing up Saturday morning. If I did, I'd probably find myself with my legs spread as I lay on top of a hard desk while he... he... It was just too horrible to think about.

But if it was horrible, what the hell was going on with my body? His sudden thrust with his hand between my legs had triggered an unconscious and definitely unwanted response from my body. The new slit between my legs tingled with something that could only be described as anticipation. I suppose it was just the reverse of a response I had experienced many times as a man as my dick grew hard as I came in contact with an attractive woman. If our sexes had been reversed and a female Professor Thurmond had slipped her hand in my pants and encircled my penis with her fingers, wouldn't I have become as hard as a rock? So there, I told myself. The response of my body meant nothing.

Or did it? I was still debating that as I got home. Marty was already there and had picked up the kids from after school day care. I realized with a start that I hadn't even thought about picking them up. It was a good thing Marty remembered. The strange thing was that I continued to think of two of my oldest associates as 'the kids.' I was becoming more and more certain that there was more to the magic of Ovid than just physical transformations.

Did that mean I would become Donna Pearson in mind as well as body? I had gotten the impression from Susan that all of us except Allie would always have our old memories. Maybe that was true, but it would become easier to act as Donna Pearson than it would be to act as Grant Douglas as time went by—unless we got changed to more compatible bodies.

“Hi, Mom!” Allie yelled, jumping up from her perch in front of the TV to give me a big hug. Strangely, the hug felt good. Kimberly was right behind her, a bit more subdued, but playing her role as best she could. She actually looked happy. If I hadn’t known who she really was, I would have seen nothing out of the ordinary with her responses. She was acting like a six-year-old girl.

“So how was your day?” Marty called from the kitchen. Something smelled surprisingly good in there and I realized he had started dinner. If things got any more domestic I’d think I had just stumbled into Pleasantville.

I joined him there as the kids went back to the TV. “Interesting,” I replied vaguely. I obviously didn’t want to tell him about my boss. “How was yours?”

“About the same,” he said, turning back to his cooking. I could have sworn he blushed though. And why wouldn’t he look me in the eye?

Allie and Kimberly kept the dinner conversation going, apparently oblivious to the silence from their new parents. I suppose I would have expected Allie to glibly carry on a conversation since she saw nothing unusual. The surprise was Kimberly though, who told of her exploits in first grade with something akin to pride. I would have expected her to be nearly as she had been the night before when she first realized she had been transformed—upset to the point of being nearly frantic. I resolved to ask her about it later.

The opportunity didn’t come until bedtime, though. She had managed to get herself all ready for bed, including a pair of pink pajamas complete with a Peter Pan collar. It was almost comical to see our former drummer pad over to her bed and climb up into it, settling down

on the pillow with a contented sigh.

“Uh... Kimberly, are you feeling okay?” I ventured as I did the motherly bit, tucking her in.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” The reply carried an inflection which wasn’t quite as childish as the tone of her tiny voice, but it wouldn’t have been entirely out of place from a normal six-year-old.

“I thought maybe being... you know, a little girl might have been tough on you today, but you didn’t say anything.”

“What is there to say?” she asked. “As I understand it, we have to act like the people we are if we’re going to get changed into something more... normal. If I’m going to be a boy again, I guess I have to act like a girl now.”

I nodded. That made sense. At least it would be easier for her. She didn’t have a lecherous boss to contend with. “So things went okay today?”

She nodded, even managing a shy smile. “Yeah, to be honest, it was a lot easier than I thought. I guess Kimberly is a very bright girl, so I could be a bit precocious without being out of place. It was kind of fun really. I never was much of a student as a boy.”

“What was class like?” I asked her, genuinely curious about her experiences.

She gave me a cute little shrug. “Oh, it was pretty normal, I guess. About a third of the kids are like us—transformees, I mean. The rest, including the teacher, are all those shades. I only talked to a couple of kids who remembered their previous lives. Both were girls and both of them used to be guys.” She frowned for a second. “The funny thing is they both seemed to like being little girls more than they liked being males. That’s weird, isn’t it?”

I nodded in agreement. “I’d certainly think so.” But it did add to my concern that the changes might be more than just physical.

“In fact one of them wants to come over and play tomorrow.”

“I have to work in the morning,” I told her, realizing I had to come up with some excuse to get out of that session or I’d be screwed—literally. There was that damned tingling sensation again.

“That’s okay. She won’t be able to come over until afternoon. Can she?”

There was an eerie, childish pleading in the tone of her voice, causing me to smile and agree to her play date. Then, just like a real mother, I kissed her on the forehead and tucked her in, leaving the room to the sound of a muffled, “G’nite, Mommy.” This time it wasn’t a tease as it had been that morning.

Only Allie wasn’t acting strangely, I thought as I left Kimberly’s room. Well, I mean only Allie wasn’t acting differently from the way we all acted when we were transformed. Kimberly was acting with something resembling an inner peace rather than the hysterical panic she had exhibited right after being transformed. She was acting as if she was actually enjoying the experience of being a little girl. Maybe she was in a way. I knew Jess had never had a particularly happy life. I think that’s why he deluged himself with drugs.

But it was Marty that I was most concerned about. He seemed to be avoiding me for some reason. His answers to me were short and delivered without looking at me. I really needed to talk to him. I needed his help to figure out what I could do to ward off my boss the next day. Marty had spent almost all of his life as a woman. What had Boop done to ward off men? I couldn’t very well claim as she could have that I was a lesbian, now could I?

“What’s bugging you?”

I caught him on his way into the bedroom we shared. There was a guilty look on his face when he saw me standing there across the room. He hadn’t realized I wasn’t still in Kimberly’s room.

“Uh... nothing,” he replied sheepishly.

Again he avoided my eyes, but this time, he looked down unconsciously. I followed his gaze and was actually amused to see his

pants tenting outward.

“Is that a mouse in your pocket?” I began the old saying. I didn’t have to finish it to be rewarded with an even deeper blush.

He plopped down on the bed, sighing in defeat. “God, Donna, I never realized it was like this... having one of these,” he moaned, motioning to the uncomfortable lump in his pants.

“It’s because of me?” I ventured, sitting down on the bed beside him.

“Partially,” he admitted. “And partially Wendy.”

“Wendy?”

“My secretary—office manager—whatever you want to call her. Donna, she wanted to blow me!”

“Blow you?” Why was I repeating whatever he said?

“Yes!” he said with an anguished cry. “I didn’t let her, of course, but I wanted to. God, Donna, I wanted to let her... her...”

“But I thought you always liked women,” I pointed out, putting an arm gently around his broad shoulders, my own problems set aside for the moment. Strangely, it felt comforting to me to hold him like that, and against my own wishes, I began to feel that tingling in my breasts and crotch again.

“I do like women, but not like that! I always thought it was disgusting for women to submit to something like that. I mean, most straight women I know don’t really like oral sex—unless they get some in return. Do you have any idea how many men there are out there who think a blowjob is their due but wouldn’t dream of performing cunnilingus on their partners?”

Fortunately, he wasn’t looking at me just then, for I was turning as red as he had been, admitting to myself that I had been one of those men.

“Apparently Wendy and whatever Marty there was before me were having an affair. I didn’t know what to do. I know we’re supposed to act like Marty and Donna, but does that mean I cheat on you as well?”

“I suppose it wouldn’t really be cheating,” I allowed slowly, realizing that Marty and I were in the same pot of soup.

“But I feel like it would be,” he replied, facing me at last so that I could see the glistening tears in his eyes.

It was the tears that did it; I’m sure of that. I just felt so sorry for him and so empathetic all at once. His face was there right in front of mine and it began to move closer and closer to me. The tingling got stronger. It was even more insistent than the sensations I had experienced in the office that day. I didn’t move my face toward his, but I didn’t move away either. It was inevitable that he would find my lips eventually.

And he did. His face felt a little coarser than any face I had ever kissed before, and I was nearly revolted by it, but this was Boop, I reminded myself. At least inside it was Boop. This was what was left of the woman who I realized suddenly that I had loved for years. Maybe that was why we always fought so much. It was a love that with Boop’s sexual orientation would always be unrequited. Now she was a man. Her sexual orientation had not really changed.

But mine had, I realized suddenly.

By all rights, I should have now been a lesbian, but I had a sneaky hunch things didn’t work that way in Ovid. No matter what my brain told me, my body was telling me something else—something I couldn’t ignore as Marty put his strong arms around me.

I can’t really relate everything that happened after that. Too much of it was based on sensation and too little of it on conscious thought. I just know I was overcome by a need unlike any I had ever had before. It wasn’t like it had been when I was male—a strong swelling demanding to be satisfied. Instead, it was a soft yearning—a feeling of wanting to be held, to be stroked, to be filled, and the sensations were coming from all over my body.

There we were together, our clothing practically ripped from our bodies as we fumbled to free ourselves. We hadn’t spoken, as if words would dampen the desire, and that was something neither of us

wanted.

Marty was a generous lover, and in retrospect, I have to admit he knew more about pleasing a woman than I had ever known as a man. His every touch set me on fire, the urge to surrender my body to him growing with each pass of his hand. I don't even remember doing it, but suddenly my back was arched and my legs spread as I watched him slowly, ever so slowly, position himself over me.

How to describe my first penetration? It was nothing like I would have imagined. It had no male equivalent that I could really think of. It felt warm, inside me, and there was the strange sensation as if my male penis had been opened, inverted, and wrapped around Marty's own member. The slow rhythm he had chosen felt powerful but safe, and the orgasm it produced built with unexpected fervor until I shuddered with pleasure.

My God, no wonder women gasped, cried or moaned when they had an orgasm. I think I did all three. There was none of the sudden explosion a man felt. Instead, it was like the feel of the softest silk run over smooth skin but magnified dozens of times over. "Oh God..." I breathed, but it was drowned out by Marty's own orgasm filling me to the brim and beyond...

We lay there together, dozing in each other's arms for at least an hour. When I suddenly came awake, I was aware of Marty snoring lightly next to me, hugging his pillow as if it were me as he enjoyed contented sleep. For me, it was different, though. I awoke to the feeling of something sticky between my legs. Oh God, what had I done?

There was something inside me now—something that didn't belong there. Could I get pregnant? No, I was sure I couldn't. Susan's husband had told me that transformed women had a grace period until they could get pregnant. That was probably to make sure careless new women like me didn't give into their new urges without a little forethought, I realized grimly.

Why had I done this? I asked myself as I carefully cleaned off the folds

of my new sex. I could understand Marty wanting it. After all, as a woman he had always preferred women to men. But me? There wasn't a gay impulse in my body...

Oh.

There it was. The Judge had probably let Boop's attraction to women stand when he created Marty. He wouldn't have to change Boop's sexual orientation so much as adjust it slightly for her new male equipment. With me though, and probably with most of the transformed, it had been a matter of reversing the orientation, almost like the poles on a magnet. Since I was always attracted to women as a man, it stood to reason I would be equally attracted to men as a woman, probably in something resembling the same intensity.

How many women had I made love to as a man? Oh for God's sake, I had been a rock star at one time, although 'star' hardly defined my later career. As Grant Douglas, I had been handsome and virile, and many girls gladly spread their legs for me—so many that I could honestly say I had lost count. What if that sexual energy were suddenly reversed? The results were self evident, I realized as I washed off the smooth skin of my inner thighs.

I found myself uttering a silent prayer that suitable replacements could be found for us quickly. Making love as a woman could easily become habit forming, particularly with a lover like Marty.

I slipped on a nightgown and silently slid back into bed. Marty grunted and woke up enough to reach over and put a large hand on one of my breasts. I sighed just a little, but it was enough to wake him up. "How are you doing?" he asked, concerned.

"I'm fine," I told him softly. His face was next to mine. On impulse, I leaned over and kissed him. That was a mistake, because it started the whole thing all over again...

All four of us were up early in spite of it being Saturday, and all four of us acted our parts in a scene of domestic tranquillity none of us had enjoyed since our teenage days. Allie and Kimberly sat happily in front of the TV watching mindless kiddie cartoons. I could understand Allie

enjoying them since she remembered no other life, but Kimberly seemed to be enraptured by them as well. I began to wonder if the damage Jess had done to his brain with drugs had carried through to his new identity.

Marty and I worked together in the kitchen, putting together one of those weekend breakfasts that have Americans rushing to the gyms to work them off. I had already called Professor Thurmond and told him I was ill and wouldn't be able to come in. I'm not sure he believed me, but what could he say? Besides, maybe he thought I had cancelled because Marty suspected something. I'd have to answer for it on Monday, but that was two days away.

I wondered as we worked together if Donna had taken up with her boss because she wanted to or because she had been forced to. I rather thought it was the former, and I thought I knew why. My suspicions were that Marty had an affair going with his secretary and that Donna found out. She decided what was good for the goose was good for the gander and agreed to an affair with her boss. I realized it could just have easily been the other way around, but I was Donna now so as far as I was concerned, Marty had to be the one who started it.

The rest of the weekend was strange but somehow relaxing. As struggling musicians, none of us had much free time on the weekends. People might fall all over themselves to see *Train* or *Smashing Pumpkins* on a Tuesday night, but has-been bands have to settle for playing Friday and Saturday night at a Holiday Inn near you. So it was actually fun to have a quiet weekend together as a family. In a perverted sort of way, we had already been family when we were *Interossiter*, but we hadn't been in the right roles then.

Were we now—in the right roles, I mean? Allie, of course, remembered no other life, but she seemed happy enough as a little girl. I remembered when she was Gordy. Gordy had told us about losing his family—his parents and his younger brother—in a terrible car crash when we were all in college. I hadn't known his family, but I felt as if I did from the number of times he spoke of them. Then, once the band

was formed, he sort of became a big brother to Jess. I guess things hadn't changed that much since he was now the former Jess's big sister.

Boop seemed content to be a man in spite of her early protests. Boop had always been good eye candy, but it was a part she had played to make the band successful. *Interossiter* wouldn't have been the same without her bouncing around in short, tight skirts while every male member of the audience fantasized about laying her after every concert. Actually, she hated the role, and that hatred spilled over to the rest of us because we didn't have to wear short, tight skirts up there with her. Now she could make love to a woman without all the baggage lesbians were saddled with in our society.

Of course, the woman she was making love to was me. So how did I feel about that? Strangely, it felt... satisfying. Don't get me wrong. I had never had a thing for men, but I did have a thing for Boop. I suppose that was the major reason I was always giving her so much crap. I was attracted to Boop, but she wasn't attracted to me, and that hurt. Now, Boop might have the exterior of a man named Marty Pearson Jr., but inside I could still sense the presence of Boop. I don't know—maybe if as Grant Douglas I had found a magic lamp, I might have allowed the genie to change me into a girl just so I could win Boop's love. Or maybe not. The only thing I knew for certain was that it felt good to be in Boop's arms, even if she was now a man called Marty.

Then there was Kimberly. One minute, I'd see Jess in her, desperate to get a male body back. Then the next minute, I'd see her in her room with her friends, giggling and acting like a typical six-year-old-girl. I suppose part of it was an act, but she seemed to really be enjoying her role.

I had no doubt that if we remained in these bodies much longer, they would become normal to us. No wonder the real residents of Ovid acted as if nothing was wrong, even when they knew they were not in their original lives. I suspected we had been offered a rare opportunity—to get something resembling our old lives back.

I tried to imagine what it would be like—to be changed into the three teens that Susan had said The Judge was willing to do for us if we played ball with him. Would we still be friends? Would we form a new band? Or on the other side of the coin, would Boop be gay and thus unwilling to love me? Or would Jess have a drug problem again? And what would happen to Allie?

Oh that's right; Allie wouldn't be with us. There was nothing of Gordy left now. She would remain Allie while we went on to our new teenage identities. It saddened me to think of that. The four of us had been together for so long. We had been like family in spite of our differences, hadn't we? But it had to be done. Otherwise, we'd all be stuck as the Pearson family for the rest of our natural lives.

There was one problem over the otherwise mundane weekend, though. Marty and I weren't content to give up on our sexual experimenting. We were like two kids with a brand new toy to share. We told ourselves that when we got bodies again of the proper sex, we'd kick ourselves if we didn't try things from the other perspective. So Saturday night, we could hardly wait for the girls to go to bed so we could play with our new bodies once again.

I suppose it was easier for Marty. Since she had a natural bent toward women, I was the same sort of dish on the menu. He just dug into it with a different fork. For me, it was a little tougher, but I just kept reminding myself that it was Boop inside that masculine shell, and Boop was the person I had always wanted.

I guess we were too loud, though. I wasn't exactly a screamer, but as Marty lay on his back and I rode him, I suppose we both got a little exuberant. The mood was broken almost immediately after he let go with an explosive climax as the door to our room creaked open and a little girl's voice uttered, "Holy shit!"

There is nothing to dampen an otherwise delightful female climax like the voice of a six-year-old girl in the darkness behind you. I managed to turn and saw Kimberly's bright blue eyes in the pale moonlight, wider than I ever imagined they could be. Before I could say anything to her, she turned and fled down the hall, and I heard her door slam

shut.

“You’d better talk to her,” Marty suggested.

“Me? Why me?”

He actually had the audacity to grin. “You’re her mother.”

“Eat me.”

“Next time.”

Okay, I told myself as I walked down the hall, pulling a motherly terrycloth robe around my otherwise naked body. It wasn’t as if this didn’t happen to real parents all the time. But Kimberly wasn’t a real six-year-old girl. I couldn’t just go in there and say, “Darling, when a man and a woman love each other very much like your father and I do...” or some such crap. Instead, I had to explain to an adult man trapped in a little girl’s body what his former male friend was doing riding on the stiff penis of his former female friend. My task was not to be envied.

Kimberly was back in bed, but she was staring out into space. In the moonlight, I could see tears in her eyes.

“Kimberly?”

“Go away!”

“Look, I know how this must seem...”

She sat up in bed, looking like a little girl on the edge of a tantrum. “No you don’t. You’re starting to like these lives, aren’t you?”

“Of course not!” I huffed as I sat on the bed next to her. “What makes you say that?”

“One of the girls in school told me what happens,” she replied, her voice breaking. “She came here with her—his—wife. They got changed into a mother-daughter. That was three years ago. At first, her wife treated her like an adult, but then it got harder to do, especially with her wife’s new husband around. She said the next thing she knew, her wife was talking to her as if she was a three-year-old, cooing at her

and dressing her up in cute little girl dresses.”

“We haven’t done that to you,” I pointed out. “As I recall, you’ve worn jeans both days since you were changed.”

“Yeah, I know,” she agreed reluctantly. “But haven’t you noticed the way you’ve been treating me today?”

“I thought you wanted to be treated that way,” I said slowly. “I thought with your friends you were just trying to fit in as a six-year-old girl.”

“I was,” she admitted. “As I understand it, it’s the only way I’m going to get a male body back.”

“I have the same understanding.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you trying to tell me that the only reason you two were... were... you know, tonight is to ‘fit in’?” Those last two words were an obvious innuendo.

“Of course,” I assured her. Or was I assuring myself?

“And you two want to get back to being the right sex again?”

“Sure.”

“Then prove it,” she demanded.

“Prove it? How?”

“Set up a meeting with The Judge,” she told me. “Get him to clarify when he’s going to take care of us.”

I’m sure my face turned pale. Kimberly had been a very wigged out Jess when we were brought before The Judge. There was no way for her to know how overwhelming The Judge could be. I had no desire to attempt to beard him in his own den. I had a hunch people who tried found themselves worse off more often than not.

“Kimberly, I...”

She folded her arms and peered at me. Under other circumstances, it would have been precocious. “Look, you think I want to remain a moppet? Will you do it or not?”

I told myself that we needed Kimberly's cooperation if we were ever to get back to bodies more familiar than these. If she didn't play her part, she might unwittingly cause the whole deal to fall apart. Oh, she would do it on purpose. After all, she wanted to get back to a male body more than I did. I mean, it was one thing to be an attractive woman, but I couldn't imagine what she was going through as a six-year-old girl.

"All right," I agreed after an uncomfortable silence. "I'll call Cindy Patton tomorrow and try to set something up with The Judge."

That satisfied her and we didn't say another word about it. I had gone back to bed where Marty was still awake and eager, but I had to beg off. I was not happy with the deal I had been forced to make. Seeing The Judge was not high on my list of fun things to do.

I felt a little better the next day after I talked to Cindy. Rather than call her, I had walked Allie down the street so she could play with Cindy's daughter. When the two of us were alone, I asked her about seeing her boss the next day.

Cindy looked up in surprise from her Diet Coke. We were seated at her kitchen table sharing a can of Diet when I had made my request. "Are you sure you want to do that?" she asked slowly. "You know, he doesn't like for people to pester him with pleas to change back."

"I just want to discuss the deal he made with us through Susan," I countered. "Kimberly has some questions, and I thought that would be the best way to do it."

"How's she adapting?"

I shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"And how about you and Marty?"

I must have blushed because she didn't wait for my answer.

"So it can be fun to be a girl, can't it?"

I wasn't sure how to answer that question. In my mind I knew the answer: yes, it could. I was more than a decade younger than I had

been as Grant Douglas. All the somewhat dissipated years on the road had been stripped away from me, and I had a life with new energy and purpose. As for the sex, yes—it was great—far better than I could have ever imagined. But I was reluctant to mention it. In spite of the positives, I had the potential to regain my rightful sex and enjoy even a younger existence. I'd be able to find renewed purpose there as well. It was as if admitting that being a woman wasn't all that bad might somehow keep me from re-attaining my manhood.

Cindy didn't wait for my answer, though. I think she knew it. She just laughed and said, "Look, I know The Judge will be in tomorrow and we don't have any trials, so why don't you pull Kimberly out of school over the lunch hour and I'll tell him you need to see him?"

I'm sure the relief showed on my face. "Thanks, Cindy."

Monday was a tense day for me. I barely slept a wink, turning down Marty's offer to "relax me." I had been too tense Sunday night to even think about having sex with him again. I knew I would be facing my boss and The Judge all in the same morning—not an enviable situation for anyone.

Professor Thurmond was indeed angry with me the next morning. I had stood him up on Saturday and he had had the rest of the weekend to brood about it. He was already in his office when I arrived, and conspicuously failed to return my morning greeting.

Even Steve noticed the snub. As he left the office, leaving Professor Thurmond and me alone, he mumbled softly, "Be careful. He's pissed." Really, did everyone know our business?

I decided to make the first move. I didn't plan to come on to him but he was my boss and it probably wouldn't do for me to get fired. I suppose that put me in the category of really needing my job. I wondered how many women every day faced the same conundrum I faced, trying to be pleasant to their bosses on one hand but not so pleasant that they found themselves in compromising situations.

"I'm sorry about Saturday... Jerry." I was standing just at his office door as he purposefully avoided looking up from his paperwork. When

I got no answer, I tried again. "I'm sorry..."

This time he looked up. "I heard you the first time." There was no warmth in his voice. "Were you really sick?"

I could see in his eyes that if I tried to maintain that ruse, he wouldn't believe me. But there was another story he might believe...

"It's what I told Marty," I said after a moment. "Jerry, he suspects something is going on. He said he wanted to come with me on Saturday. He offered to help me. The only thing I could think of was to pretend to be sick and not go at all."

His frown softened. He hadn't expected that reply. It was just the sort of reply that would feed both his ego and his natural suspicion. "Yes, I think I can understand that," he said slowly. "That could make things difficult."

I could see just what he was thinking. An angry husband complaining to the college authorities might create serious problems for him. Sexual harassment was probably more damaging to the career of a college official than it would be to anyone else. Add to it the fact that I notice Capta College had a woman president and for Jerry, the shit could easily hit the fan.

"Maybe we should sort of cool it for a while," I suggested.

My boss suddenly transformed—oh not physically as I had, but the expression on his face turned from a stern one to the ingratiating look of a used car salesman with a hot prospect. "Oh I don't think we need to do that." He rose slowly, a carnivore stalking his prey. "That wouldn't be good for either of us."

I thought about turning and running, but what good would that do? I mustn't lose this job, I reminded myself. I mustn't. Losing the job might count with The Judge as lousing up Donna's life. Then there'd be no transformation back to a male existence.

He stealthily closed the door behind me and slipped a strong arm around my waist, pulling me toward him. Oh God, he was going to kiss me, I realized. I wondered if he had been someone else before and

what he had done to get turned into such a sleaze. I braced myself for contact with his lips, hoping I could make the kiss sincere.

The sudden shrill ring of his phone caused both of us to jump. As casually as possible, he looked over at the display on the phone to see who was calling. I know he intended to ignore it unless it was an important call. I nearly sighed with relief when I saw it was the president's personal line.

"Yes, Betty..."

Good. It definitely was Betty Vest, the president of the college.

"Right now?"

Oh yes, yes, yes!

The frown was back. "I'll be right there." He hung up and looked at me, but this time he was looking at his secretary. "Where are those files on that course in eighteenth century American literature?"

"I'll get them," I told him, turning quickly so he couldn't see the big smile on my face.

As promised, I picked up Kimberly at school just before noon. I tried to put a happy face on things and make her feel that The Judge was going to be pleasant and cooperative, but in my heart I didn't feel that way. My last and only run-in with The Judge had resulted in my transformation. I had thought him to be an arrogant, sanctimonious ass who had robbed me of my very existence. Maybe that should be the definition of a god. I expected little or no help from him, but if we were to get any cooperation from Kimberly, she had to be made to understand that our only chance to get back to lives more like our own would involve cooperating with him.

I suppose in a way, Kimberly had the hardest job of any of us. Marty had his secretary to corral and I had a boss with nothing but sex on his mind, but at least the roles we had to play were those of adults. Granted, our sexes had been changed, but at least we were adults with familiar responsibilities. But Kimberly... what must it be like for her to awaken and find that not only had her sex been changed but

that she was a mere six-year-old, barely past the toddler stage.

From what I had observed of her already, she was doing a reasonably good job of it. None of her friends seemed to think of her as anything but what she appeared to be. And around other adults, she assumed the demure role of a bright young girl. In a bizarre way, I suspected she would never admit to anyone including herself she seemed to be enjoying her part. Perhaps there were some compensations—no responsibilities, lesser expectations, and that sort of thing.

Or perhaps she was just enjoying life. Jess had joined the band because he was an absolutely incredible drummer, but he came to the band complete with the drug problem that had led to his ‘death.’ In a more lucid moment, he had told me that he started on drugs back in high school with his first band. That meant that Jess had been stoned for the greater part of his adult life.

Now though, as Kimberly, she was young and alert with no chemicals to dull her brain. In the short time I had observed her as my daughter, she exhibited a mind I had never imagined when she had been Jess. Although she hadn’t told me, I overheard her friends asking her questions like “How come you’re so smart?” If she were to stay in her new life and apply herself, I suspected she would someday be the valedictorian of Ovid High School.

Cindy smiled at us as we entered The Judge’s office. That made me feel a little better. I realized that Cindy must be like all of us—transformed from another life into this one. I wondered who she had been in a previous life. Maybe an attorney, I thought, since she was working with The Judge now. Had she been a male attorney? I was finding that most Ovidians seldom spoke of their previous lives, so I might never know.

She ushered us into The Judge’s empty office with a last minute admonition: “Don’t do anything to make him mad.”

“What makes him mad?” I asked.

She looked puzzled for a second before replying, “Come to think of it, just about anything might.” And with that, she closed the door behind

her.

“How can I be of service to you Mrs. Pearson?”

Kimberly and I both jumped. The Judge was standing before us from behind his desk, and yet neither of us had seen him as we entered. It was a not-so-subtle reminder to us both that we were not dealing with a small-town judge—as if we really needed reminding.

I took a deep breath and began, “When we were... before you the other day, Jess—I mean Kimberly—wasn’t in any condition to understand what was going on. I thought you could enlighten her.”

He motioned for us both to sit. I sat in the one chair before his desk while Kimberly took a chair to one side. The Judge smiled indulgently at Kimberly as if she were the six-year-old girl she appeared to be.

“And what would you like to know, my dear?”

I nearly gasped as Kimberly took The Judge’s politeness as some sign of weakness. I could see her little brows furrow as she sat forward in her chair. “I’d like to know what gives you the right to do this to us? What makes you think...?”

Her voice trailed off into a gagging sound as The Judge waved his hand before her.

“...and my dolly’s name is Samantha. And I...” Her voice trailed off as a look of terror crossed her face.

There was one on mine as well as Kimberly prattled along like the average six-year-old would. It wasn’t like Allie’s situation; Kimberly was mentally aware of what she was doing, but it was as if the autopilot we had all experienced suddenly went out of control, governing our actions whether we wanted it to or not.

“... and I’d like a kitty to play with and...”

The Judge waved his hand once more, a stern and unforgiving look on his face as he stared into Kimberly’s eyes. “You are by my will Kimberly Pearson and when you are in my chambers, you will act accordingly. Is that clear to you, young lady?”

I could see in her eyes that she wanted to fight him, but discretion truly is the better form of valor. She merely nodded nervously and mumbled, “Yes sir!”

The Judge relaxed. “Fine, my dear. Perhaps you should just listen as adults discuss this issue.” Without waiting for a response, he turned back to me.

“Your Honor,” I began carefully, determined not to incur the wrath of this powerful being, “since... Kimberly didn’t have the opportunity to hear the offer you made for us, I thought perhaps you could tell her what you were willing to do for us depending upon our level of cooperation.”

I must have phrased my request correctly, for The Judge looked more at ease than before and offered me a small smile. “Yes, I suppose that would be of interest to her.” He picked up a thin folder lying on his desk. “It’s all right here,” he announced. “If you cooperate with us, I will grant you new identities—complete with your original sex—just as soon as your replacements are available. Each of these new identities will be a healthy young teenager from a good home. It’s a most unusual offer.”

He tossed the file folder back on his desk and ignored it as it slid to a halt perched just at the edge of the desk. Kimberly reached out and grabbed it before it fell. While The Judge continued to devote his full attention to me, I noticed Kimberly had the opportunity to skim the file. Good, I thought. That way she could see that The Judge’s offer was legitimate.

“And how are you fitting in, my dear?” The Judge asked me solicitously.

“Oh, all right, I guess,” I replied, feeling my face flush just a little. I wondered if he suspected that Marty and I had used our reversed sexes as an opportunity to experiment. I thought that he probably did know. After all, it was only natural for a person to wonder what the opposite sex experienced when making love. It seemed to me that it would be natural to experiment.

“Good,” he replied in a soothing tone. “I’m pleased that your group has made such an effort to conform.” He looked over at Kimberly who had replaced the file on The Judge’s desk without him noticing. “I hope, young lady, that you can follow your parents’ example and act the part you’ve been given. Do you think you can do that?”

Kimberly looked frightened, but she managed to reply, “Yes, sir.”

The Judge rose. “Then if the two of you will excuse me…”

We took our cue and left without any further discussion. Kimberly obviously wanted to say something to me as we left, but I motioned for her to remain quiet until we got to the car. Once in the car, I asked her, “Do you feel better now, knowing that we have a chance at getting more appropriate lives if we cooperate?”

“Oh God, you don’t understand,” she wailed suddenly, tears forming in her eyes. “It’s a trap!”

She was practically hysterical after that, and I decided to take her back home rather than having lunch with her and returning her to school. I had never seen her act quite like she was acting just then—even after she had discovered her transformation. I managed to get her into the house and get her a glass of milk. By the time she had downed most of it, she seemed to have calmed down.

I was anxious to hear what she had to say. Our short stay in Ovid had been filled with one strange revelation after another. First, we had wondered about the strange town. Then we had found ourselves hauled into an odd court and transformed into different people. Then we had discovered that we each had a life we had never known before, and that we would have to react to decisions which were made in our new names but without our personal knowledge. We had been offered a way out of those new lives, but I had a sinking feeling that what Kimberly was about to tell me might mean that the prices to attain those lives might be more than we could pay.

“Now, will you tell me what’s wrong?” I prodded gently, aware that I must have sounded very much like the mother I appeared to be.

She sighed and began to tell her story as calmly as she could. “You know I was in a band back in high school?”

“Sure.” I nodded. “You told us about it. That’s why we wanted you as our drummer. You had the experience.”

“We were great,” she said dreamily. “No offense, but *God’s Gizzard* was a great band.”

“*God’s Gizzard*?” I repeated, giggling in spite of myself.

She shrugged. “Okay, it wasn’t much of a name, but we wailed, man. I mean we really had the sound. Our lead singer was a doll—great eye candy. She had a voice that makes Stevie Nicks sound bad. You know what I mean—that same smokiness Nicks has but smoother with a wider range. And no offense to you, but our lead guitarist and male vocalist would have put you to shame.”

“So what happened?” I asked, genuinely curious. By the time we had hooked up with Jess, he was already pretty strung out. He never talked about his old band. Until that day, I had never even known what they called themselves.

“Drugs happened,” she mumbled, her head down. “We got into them big time. It was fun at first. We even convinced ourselves that we needed them to play. We really sounded great, too. Until Adrian—that was our male lead—he got high one night after a performance and just... died.”

“Died?”

“OD’d big time. It wasn’t pretty. I don’t even know what he took. But right after the performance, he started choking and grabbing at his chest. He collapsed right into me, knocking me over when he fell.”

We were both silent for a minute. It seemed odd to watch a six-year-old girl who was seeing something so painful through her young eyes—something which happened so long ago that it should have been before she was even born.

At last, she giggled, but there was no mirth in the sound. “You know, it’s funny. Just before we played that night, Adrian told me I needed to

watch what I took more carefully. He was afraid I'd be the one to die. Of course, he was the one with the weak heart, but we didn't know that until after the autopsy. It was a freak accident—a little bit too much of this and too little of that and his heart just went crazy.

“Carla—she was our female vocalist—she really liked Adrian. I guess you could say she loved him. They never talked marriage or anything, but they were usually shackled up. She just couldn't take it after that. The band split up after that. Adrian was the one who always held things together. Carla ended up frying her brain on something. The last I heard, she was in a mental institution out in California.”

I put my arm around her small shoulders. “I never realized,” I told her softly. I suppose I could have added that her story explained a lot about Jess. I could tell from the way Kimberly told the story that she was closer to Adrian and Carla than she had ever been to any other people in her life as Jess. It explained why Jess had been cooking himself for so many years—he needed the drugs to dull the pain. Maybe he even blamed himself just for surviving.

“But Kimberly,” I continued, bringing her back to the reality of who she had become, “what does all of this have to do with your assertion that The Judge is trying to trap us?”

She looked up at me, the pain still in her eyes. “Don't you see? Don't you understand?”

I stared at her stupidly, unsure of what to say.

“There were pictures in that file—pictures of who we will be if The Judge changes us. Those teens—they look like Adrian, Carla and me. The Judge is going to make us re-enact their lives. It's going to happen all over again...” She burst into sudden tears. To my surprise, she leaped out of the kitchen chair and threw herself into my arms. As alarmed as I was, it felt somehow... gratifying to have her there, sniffing all over my blouse as I patted her long, silky hair.

“It's all right,” I soothed, a little unsettled myself from what she had told me. Could that actually be The Judge's plan for us? “It can't be that bad. Why, I haven't seen any drugs here in Ovid, so I don't think we'd

be able to repeat their mistakes.”

She looked up at me, and through the tears argued, “But there is alcohol here. Maybe we’ll all become alcoholics or something...”

She had a point there. I had seen several bars and restaurants in Ovid that served liquor. There seemed to be no prohibition on alcoholic beverages. Although I hadn’t seen anyone staggering around drunk, that didn’t mean it couldn’t happen.

“I don’t want to become like that,” she pressed. “Not ever again.”

“But Boop is... you know... a lesbian,” I pointed out. “If she becomes Carla and I become Adrian, their romance won’t repeat itself.” I found myself saddened by that, as if I had realized it for the first time.

“I don’t think The Judge likes same-sex relationships. Look at how Boop has changed since she became... Daddy.”

“It’s really not a change. She—he—still likes girls.” Yeah, he likes me. But when Marty becomes this Carla person, what happens then? I wondered. If Kimberly was right, she might be attracted to the new me. But what if she was wrong? What if the new Carla would be attracted to girls? I didn’t want to think about that.

“Look, why don’t you go upstairs and get some rest? We can talk more about this later.”

“Okay, Mommy.”

I was shocked when she said that. It was so natural. Oh, I don’t mean natural for Jess, but it was natural for a six-year-old girl named Kimberly. I realized suddenly that she had retreated back into the automatic mode. I carried her up to her room as she hugged me fiercely. If anyone had seen us like that, all they would have seen was a nurturing mother comforting her little girl. It would have appeared so natural. The strange thing was that it actually felt natural as well. I began to wonder if over time we became exactly what we appeared to be whether we wanted to or not. If so, we needed to be changed into the trio of teens as quickly as possible.

But what if Kimberly was right? I asked myself once I had placed her

on her bed and wiped away her girlish tears. What if the three teens we were to become were destined for a tragic end? Part of me argued that nothing was foreordained. We could overcome any predestination, couldn't we? But then again, these were gods we were dealing with. They may have invented predestination. And the gods I remembered from my youthful reading delighted in such antics. It was almost like a divine version of *Let's Make a Deal*. What will it be? Will you keep the lives you've been given or would you like to see what's hiding behind Door Number Three?

Kimberly wasn't the only one in the family who was upset that evening. Marty got home late, and when he came in the house, he scarcely spoke to me or to Allie who had joined me in the kitchen to help make dinner. Allie tried her level best to draw her father and her sister out of their respective funks at dinner. Poor Allie, I thought. In so many ways, she was like Gordy. It had to be hard for her to cope with the quirks of the three of us while she had no memories of our previous lives together.

I waited until the girls were in bed before confronting Marty. Fool that I was, I confronted him in our bedroom, not mindful of what had happened between us the last time I had done that.

"Wendy again?" I asked partially out of amusement and partially out of concern.

"How did you know?" he gasped, his face hovering between fear and guilt.

"A woman can always tell," I told him sarcastically.

He ignored the sarcasm, looking down at the floor like a guilty child. "I would have let her do it this time," he confessed.

"Do what?"

"The blowjob. I was working on a proposal. It was a big policy for the Farmer's and Merchant's Bank." Recognizing my blank stare, he explained, "They're the biggest bank in town. Anyway, I was working away on it and didn't notice when Wendy came in. Before I knew it,

she had her hands on my shoulders and started rubbing them. God, it felt good. And then one thing led to another. She said she didn't know why I was mad at her. I told her I wasn't mad..."

"Damn it, Marty, cut to the chase!" I demanded angrily. "Did you screw her?"

He actually looked shocked. "Screw her? Oh, no! No, I..."

"Did she give you a blowjob?"

"Not exactly..."

I sighed dramatically. "Marty, will you tell me how a woman not exactly gives a man a blowjob?"

"She was down on her knees before I knew it," he said in a rush. "She had my zipper open and I... I..."

"You were hard and ready," I prompted. "I used to have one of those things, remember?"

"Yeah. Just then, some farmer came in looking for a quote on insurance for his truck. Wendy got up so fast I thought she was going to hit her head on the side of the desk." He snickered a little at that. "I made sure I left when my client did, leaving Wendy to close up. But jeez, Donna, I could hardly walk. I'm getting hard again just thinking about it!"

I don't know why, but I found myself relieved that Marty hadn't gotten that blowjob. I know we weren't really married, but somehow it felt as if that would be cheating on me. Besides, it brought back too many unpleasant memories of our days together in the band—back when I thought I had a chance at Boop. Back before I realized she would never have anything to do with any man.

"Donna, do you think..."

I was a little lost in thought, and Marty's tentative request was entered so meekly that I didn't have a clue where he was going. "Think what?"

"That you could... you know... give me a... a..."

“A blowjob?” My eyes widened as I realized I had said that loud enough to be heard a block away.

“It’s not that bad. I’ve given them to guys—back in high school at least.”

Well I hadn’t. Yeah, I know there are a fair number of guys in bands who are AC/DC, but I wasn’t one of them. I got my share of sex as a performer, but it was all one-hundred percent heterosexual sex. “I thought you told me that most straight women didn’t like oral sex,” I pointed out.

He thought about that for a moment. “I believe I added ‘unless they got it in return’.”

“So there you are!” I said triumphantly.

“Okay.”

“Okay what?”

“Okay, I’ll do you first.”

Oh shit. This conversation hadn’t gone where I wanted it to go, I realized suddenly. I had backed myself into something of a corner. To be honest, I didn’t exactly mind Marty doing me orally. In my short time as a woman, I had come to think of sex as something I might as well experience, since once I had been changed back into a male, I’d never have another shot at it. Spreading my legs for Marty wasn’t such a big deal. It didn’t feel queer. After all, men didn’t have what I had between my legs, so how could it be queer?

But a blowjob was different. I could do those just as easily as a male as I could as a female. After all, a man doesn’t have a vagina, but he does have a mouth. No matter how much I enjoyed sex as a woman, I’d lose the ability to have sex that way when my vagina went away. But as for blowjobs... Of course I was sure I wouldn’t enjoy the experience, so I supposed I had nothing really to fear. Still reluctant, I managed an “Okay.”

He didn’t give me any time to reconsider. I suppose from his standpoint, urgency was the word of the day. I could see his pants

tenting out already in anticipation of what I had carelessly agreed to do. But it was to be my turn first. He undressed me quickly but not unkindly. I had changed into jeans and a cotton top when I had gotten home from The Judge's office, but he didn't even bother with the top, instead sliding my jeans down my smooth legs and discarding them. My panties he slid down more slowly, using his hands to caress my inner thighs as he did so. I could feel a little electric tingle as he touched me there.

Then, to my surprise, he didn't go directly between my legs. Instead, he now removed my top and my bra with equal aplomb, making certain that his large, smooth hands took a moment to caress my breasts. I felt myself gasp involuntarily.

I was already getting wet by the time he lowered his face into my crotch. Somewhere inside my mind, Grant Douglas was trying to tell me not to go through with this, but while I had the mind and memories of Grant Douglas, I had already discovered that the body I now possessed in fact possessed me. It was a normal heterosexual female body, and it knew without my telling it what was about to happen.

How can I describe what Marty did to me that night? I had no idea what the human tongue was capable of doing. Marty drove me to the brink not once, not twice, but three magnificent times before allowing me to fall over the edge in what had to be the most incredible orgasm imaginable. How could I have ever known oral sex could be so pleasurable? As a man, I had always considered a blowjob a second rate substitute for good old fashioned penetration. Now though, I was starting to understand why some women actually preferred oral sex to anything else.

I was lying there basking in the pleasure of the orgasmic wave when I heard Marty ask, "How was it?"

"Incredible!" I breathed. "How did you know how...? I mean..."

Marty laughed, "You know you're not exactly the first girl I've done that to. That's what girl-to-girl is all about, right?"

"I suppose." I hugged myself. "I just never knew how wonderful it could

feel.”

“So are you ready to do your end of the deal?”

That brought me out of my sexual stupor. “Huh?”

“The... uh... blowjob?”

“Oh yeah.” I was so far out I had actually let myself forget about my part of the bargain. But fair was fair. I certainly had no cause to back out now. Marty had sent me soaring. I had to bite the bullet and... I giggled just a little. It wasn't exactly a bullet I was going to be biting, was it?

Marty saved me the time of undressing him. He dropped his pants and stood there in front of me, looking for all the world like a high school boy about to get his very first one from his girlfriend. I tried to focus on his comical face; it kept me from thinking about what I was about to do.

Silently, I dropped to my knees. I gently took him in my hands, feeling the hard, almost slick surface of his penis. I could see he was so ready that I wouldn't have to play with it very long. If I did, he'd be done long before I put my lips around it. Throwing caution aside, I wrapped my lips around him and began what had to be done.

A strange thought crossed my mind as I worked on him as best I could. I remembered an old joke: Why does the bride always smile at her wedding? The answer? Because she knows she's already given the last blowjob she'll ever have to give. Would that it were so.

I went on automatic as much as I could, but even on automatic, I could see myself performing. The only thing I managed to do on automatic was to perform the act a little less awkwardly. Even on automatic, I wasn't prepared for the explosion in my mouth. I gagged, involuntarily spilling the cum out of my mouth and all over my breasts. There were tears in my eyes from the shock, and my neck hurt from where Marty had tried to hold my head in place.

Marty was certainly satisfied. His groans of pleasure were loud and sincere. That was the only thing that made me feel a little better. At

least he had enjoyed it. I certainly hadn't.

I rushed to the bathroom and wiped myself off as quickly as I could while spitting the salty fluid into the sink. I planned to use a full bottle of mouthwash to get rid of the taste. At least, I told myself, I didn't need to worry about wanting to do this when I was changed back into a man. I never wanted to give anyone a blowjob again as long as I lived.

"What's wrong?"

It was Marty. I hadn't heard him come into the bathroom behind me, so intent was I on getting the taste of his ejaculation out of my mouth. My voice was husky from all the gargling when I replied, "I don't want to ever do that again."

"All right."

"All right?"

He came up behind me and put his large arms around my tiny waist.

"Look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have forced you to do that."

"You didn't force me," I said quietly.

I could feel him shrug. "Maybe not, but you didn't want to do it. I don't blame you. I never liked to do them either. I... I think that's one of the reasons I turned away from men altogether. But since you didn't seem to have any problem making love to me as a woman..."

I started to protest but stopped, knowing it was worthless. The fact was I had enjoyed making love to him as a woman, as strange as that would have sounded to me a few days earlier, but it was true.

"...so I just was... curious about how it felt to have a blowjob."

"And how did it feel?" I asked dully as I felt his penis rising behind me.

"It felt good," he admitted. "But not as good as making love to you the regular way."

I felt suddenly warm and content in his embrace. There was an unexpected twitching between my legs. I found myself asking

tentatively, “Well, do you want to try it ‘the regular way’?”

I saw a smile forming on his lips in the image in the mirror. He released me and took my hand, leading me back into the bedroom. For the first time all evening, I began to think things might be all right.

However, things weren’t all right at work—not for me and not for Marty. Wendy the Trollop continued to press him for the next couple of days. To his credit, Marty managed to find excuses to be out of the office for a good portion of that time, but whenever he was there, Wendy would put the moves on him, reminding him that she could very easily blab about their relationship all over town. As small a town as Ovid was, Marty’s reputation would be ruined. It would cost him much of his business, and as for the remainder of his business, Wendy actually did much of the grunt work while Marty sold. Even accessing the automatic functions of being Marty, he wouldn’t be able to keep track of much. We’d be ruined.

And it was unlikely we could fall back on what I was making. I found out when I saw my first paycheck how little department secretaries made at Capta College. Even down-on-their-luck rock bands made more, and that was saying something. Besides, the way things were going, I didn’t think I’d have the job much longer anyway. Professor Thurmond was obviously annoyed with my rebuffs. I had no doubt that considering the attention he was used to getting from Donna before my arrival, he considered himself to be jilted. I suppose he was right in a way.

While he had stopped putting the moves on me, he had started finding things wrong with my work. I suspected he was building a case to have me terminated. Sure, it was sexual harassment, but how could I prove it? Besides, I suspected that the previous Donna had welcomed the relationship, just as the previous Marty had enjoyed a pleasant relationship with Wendy. Not that it made what I was undergoing any less than sexual harassment, but it at least explained why he was being such a prick about it.

Alone in the office, I decided to call Susan to see if she had any suggestions for me. I suspected that the last requirement we must

meet before being given new teenage lives would be to reconcile our relationships—both domestic and professionally—one way or another. Perhaps Susan knew the answer to that.

“I really can’t help you,” she explained over the phone after I had told her what was going on.

“Please, Susan...”

“Donna, I don’t mean I won’t help you. I mean I can’t help you. I don’t know exactly what you’re supposed to do.”

“But you work for The Judge,” I argued.

“No I don’t,” she corrected me. “I work with him, but there is a definite arm’s length relationship between a defense attorney and a judge—even in Ovid.”

I was at a dead end. Or was I? Perhaps Susan could help me after all.

“Susan, you at least know The Judge. What do you think he wants us to do? Isn’t that at least within your power to tell us as our attorney? I mean, even if you don’t know for certain, can’t you at least advise us?”

Her voice brightened over the phone. “You’re right, Donna. I guess I’ve been working in Ovid so long I’ve forgotten what a real attorney is supposed to do. Okay. Here’s my advice. As if you hadn’t noticed, Ovid is a little straight-laced. There’s no smoking, no prostitution, not even a lot of drinking. The bars around here are fairly tame.”

“So you’re saying The Judge probably wants Marty and I to break off these other relationships. That would be the straight-laced thing to do.”

“I believe you’re right.”

“In spite of the fact that according to myths, our Judge had a rather rocky marital relationship?”

“And still does,” she laughed. “Apparently he and his wife haven’t said a civil word to each other in a few centuries. But I can tell you this. As far as I know, The Judge is pretty straight arrow these days. None of us know what he does in his free time, but I don’t think it’s sexual.”

“But he surrounds himself with beautiful women—you and Cindy for example,” I pointed out.

“Well, I’d hardly call myself beautiful,” she replied. I could practically hear her face turning red.

I was excited about figuring out what to do. It was obvious when I thought about it. I was relieved as well. What if The Judge had really wanted Marty and I to continue our extracurricular activities? It was one thing to make love to Marty. All I had to do was remind myself that somewhere inside my hunk of a husband was the woman I had secretly loved for many years. Professor Thurmond had no such tie to me, and I couldn’t imagine making love to him for even an instant.

Unfortunately, Susan had no solution for how we could fend off our supposed lovers without damaging ourselves in other ways. I’d have a hard time proving Professor Thurmond was actually sexually harassing me without going public with what we had already done—even though my side of the ‘we’ had been before I had even been Donna. As for Marty, Wendy could ruin him legally with a sexual harassment suit of her own. Marty had no case against her that would hold up in court, even though it was a lie.

I told Kimberly and Marty what I had learned while Allie was upstairs taking a bath.

“So we’re stuck,” Marty said glumly. “If we give into them, The Judge will probably keep us like this. And if we don’t, they’ll ruin us.”

“Not necessarily.”

Marty and I looked over at Kimberly who had just spoken. We had been ignoring her, treating her exactly like the six-year-old she appeared to be. One look at her knitting her brows as she carefully thought out a potential plan was enough to remind us that she might be physically only six but she was mentally our equal.

“What have you got in mind?” I asked her at last. I suddenly realized I was ready to listen to an idea from a person who used to be our drummer, Jess. In all the years the band had been together, I had

never listened to Jess. None of us had. Of course, he was usually too strung out to make much sense. Now though, I realized with no little pride that Kimberly was worth listening to.

“Here’s what we can do…” she began.

Professor Thurmond practically threw the papers on my desk. “Donna, look at this. This isn’t what I asked you to do.” There was a peevishness to his voice that was well staged. He knew the papers he had thrown on my desk represented exactly what he had told me to do, and so did I. I fought down the urge to defend myself though. It would spoil the plan.

“Professor Thurmond,” I began in a soft, subservient tone, “could I have a moment with you in private?”

The scowl left his face. This wasn’t what he had been expecting. No, in fact I had been very carefully avoiding moments in private with him for the last few days, knowing very well where he expected those moments to go. I could see a look of triumph in his eyes. He had won! He was certain of it. In no time at all, I’d be giving him a tearful apology, followed by a trip down on my knees under his desk to show with my lips how sorry I really was.

No dice, Jack, I told myself. If I didn’t want to give Marty another blowjob, I certainly didn’t want to give one to this creep.

“Why don’t you come in, Donna?” he said smoothly, motioning to the door to his office. Ah yes, the Emperor could be munificent when it suited him. All could be forgiven just as soon as the dirt on the floor under his desk graced my nylon-covered knees.

When he shut the door behind me, I thought just that this might not be the best idea I had ever acted upon. I had to do this just right, I reminded myself. If I didn’t, I’d be either fired or raped—maybe both.

He stood before me, a smug look on his face. “Now what is it you wanted to tell me?”

“That I’m sorry,” I said a little breathlessly. “Oh Jerry, I’m sorry about the way I’ve been treating you the last few days.” I, of course, said

nothing about how the bastard had been treating me. “I know you must think I’m terrible, but so much has happened...”

As I let my voice trail off, I could see his curiosity rising. “What... has happened?” he asked cautiously.

I reached out and took his hand. “Oh Jerry, I want to tell you everything, but not here... not now.”

“Why not here and now?”

“You have a meeting with the Provost,” I reminded him. Of course, I had picked a time when he did have a meeting just to make sure I had him hooked for the next request.

“Damn! I nearly forgot it.” Good. That meant I had him a little off balance. He wanted me and he wanted to know what was going on. There was a way he could have both or so I needed to make him believe.

“Why don’t we go to lunch after your meeting?” I suggested. “We can go over to *The Greenhouse* and get a quiet little table in back. I can tell you everything then.”

“Well...”

“And your one o’clock meeting has been moved back to three. We can come back here and...”

Again I let my voice trail off and had the satisfaction of watching my boss use his imagination to determine how many times I could bring him to climax before his three o’clock meeting. I had a grim suspicion the Donna Pearson who existed before I came on the scene would have gladly accommodated him in every respect. Of course, it was his memories of that Donna Pearson that made him want to believe everything I was telling him. I had to marvel, though, at the seductive power women had over men. I was surprised that women didn’t rule the world. Or maybe they did and the men just weren’t smart enough to realize it.

“I suppose we could do that,” he agreed with a predatory smile to meet my coy one. It was a date. I had him!

Now all I had to do was wait for him to pick me up for lunch. So far, the plan was working. Well why shouldn't it? This was exactly what Jerry Thurmond wanted. I wondered if Marty was having equal success. For the first time in my life, I was thankful Marty had been a lesbian when he was a woman. It would make it easier to do what he had to do.

Professor Thurmond was right on time to pick me up for lunch, but it didn't take much imagination to figure out what he really wanted to be on the menu. I had purposefully worn a sexy outfit that day—short skirt, especially high heels, and smoky hose that were attached to garters that he couldn't have missed seeing when I had crossed my legs in his office earlier. Yes, I was to be the main course no matter what he ordered at the restaurant—unless our plan worked, of course.

I had eaten at *The Greenhouse* with a couple of the other secretaries from the college, so I knew the layout of the place. I had intentionally reserved a table in the most secluded section with the excuse that we had business to discuss. As we were being shown to the table, I thought that it was a good thing Ovid was a relatively small place. In a large city, my boss would have already had his arm around me, but there was too much of a chance of running into someone you knew in a town like Ovid. Of course, that was the plan...

"Donna!"

It was Marty calling out to me from a booth just down from the one I had reserved. I breathed a silent sigh of relief. Marty had kept up his part of the plan.

"Oh God!" I said quietly in Jerry's ear. "It's my husband. What are we going to do?" Poor little helpless feminine me—I was trapped without a plan—or so he thought.

"Why don't you join us?" Marty offered gallantly. The blonde sitting across from him scowled dangerously. Marty gave her a little, almost imperceptible shrug as if to say, "What else can I do?"

Jerry looked equally uncomfortable, and I could see he was trying to find some way to refuse. The look on his face was that of a primitive

male prepared to fight for his female. How stupidly romantic. Or should that be romantically stupid? “Don’t worry,” I whispered in his ear. “We’ll just have lunch with them and linger afterward.”

I could see that delaying things wasn’t going to do much to alleviate the swelling in his pants, but that was too bad. “All right,” he agreed reluctantly. After all, he had an image to maintain. Duking it out with my husband in a restaurant would not have improved his stature in the community.

Just as we arranged it, Marty got out of the booth and let Jerry slide across. I figured the blonde—Wendy of course—would never get up herself. The most I could expect from her was that she would reluctantly slide over allowing me to sit opposite Marty. That was a bad tactical move on her part, but what could I expect of the little bitch?

Introductions were quick and perfunctory since apparently only Jerry and Wendy had never met before, and Marty and I quickly grabbed our menus and pretended to study them.

“Just what do you do, Ms. Adams?” Jerry asked. He was turning on the charm in spite of himself. It was just too ingrained in his personality. Wendy was an attractive girl in a trappy sort of way, and Jerry was the sort of man who had to draw the attention of an attractive woman in order to feel attractive himself.

“I’m a secretary in Marty’s insurance agency,” she replied, making it clear in the way she said it that she felt she was destined for greater things.

“Oh?”

And the conversation went on from there as lunch was ordered then delivered. It was fascinating to be a woman and hear a man try to impress another woman in my presence. Jerry pretended to listen to every word Wendy uttered, but I could see in his eyes that he was really thinking about a better use for her lips than talking. Wendy on the other hand was trying her best to impress the Great College Professor. At first it was just a tease to annoy Marty, but as Jerry hung

on her every utterance, she began to try to impress him as someone who might be able to do something for her.

“Mrs. Pearson?”

I looked up over my lunch and saw the worried face of the manager. She seemed reluctant to tell me the bad news, completely unaware that I knew just about exactly what she was going to say. “Yes?” I asked innocently.

“Your office just called. They had a call from your daughter’s school. She just passed out...”

“Oh my God!” I hoped I wasn’t overplaying it. Marty gave me a concerned look and put a hand on mine. I jumped up. “Excuse me,” I muttered, half hysterically. “I have to go. It’s my baby!”

“You’re in no condition to drive,” Marty warned, rising as well. “I’d better take you.” He looked around helplessly. “Jerry...”

My boss gave him a dismissive wave. “Don’t worry about it, old man. I understand completely.” He then looked at Wendy. “And I’ll be happy to see your secretary back to work as well.” I couldn’t see the look on Wendy’s face, but the satisfied smile on Jerry’s face was enough for me.

Marty gave him a grateful nod and ushered me out of the restaurant.

“Oh God! Kimberly’s plan might work!” I exclaimed as I jumped into the car practically giddy.

“I hope so,” Marty agreed, starting the car up. “You have no idea how hard it was to get Wendy to go to lunch with me. She wanted to lock the door to the office and jump me right there.”

“We’re close,” I told Marty. “I’m sure this is what The Judge wanted us to do. We’ll have our new lives by sundown.”

Marty was strangely silent but I let it pass. I knew he had actually gotten a kick out of being a man for a while. And why not? It was probably easier for him to make love to women now that he was a man...

I looked over at him as he drove intently toward Kimberly's school. Boop was actually enjoying being Marty. Until that moment, I had thought it was just the magical ability to adjust that had made Marty seem so natural as a man. Now I was starting to see he was natural as a man because he wanted to be a man. Maybe Boop was more than just a lesbian. Maybe Boop had always harbored a desire to be a man. I knew there were men who wanted to be women. I had even met one once—a female impersonator who was playing a hotel next to the one we had played in San Diego a few years back. That guy wanted to be a woman so badly he was even contemplating surgery to look like a real woman.

Was Boop like that? Did she really want to be a man? I had read somewhere that it was hard to do the female to male surgery as effectively as the male to female variety. I didn't know for sure, but it made sense. Now here was the golden opportunity for her. She could be the man she always wanted to be and no one had to carve her up to do it.

No, I thought, that couldn't be right. If she wanted to remain as Marty, all she had to do was absolutely nothing. The Judge would then declare that we had failed to do what he required to be changed and we'd all be stuck as the Pearson family.

Kimberly proved to be a marvellous little actress. Of course, it helped that she had the mind of an adult male which, when unencumbered by drugs, was proving to be quite adept. She was lying down on the small bed in the nurse's office, a cold compress on her forehead and her eyes barely open.

She stirred with nearly comic overacting as she said softly, "Oh Mommy, is that you?"

"She passed out in class," the nurse explained to Marty and me. Yes, and she passed out right on cue. Her tiny girl's watch had been synchronized with mine that morning, so she must have timed her faint perfectly.

"Oh are you all right, darling?" I asked in my best worried-mother voice

as I rushed to her side. Fortunately, the nurse couldn't see me wink at the 'stricken' girl or the wink she gave me in return.

"I think so, Mommy."

"This happens every now and then," the nurse told us as she patted her short, dark hair in place. "They get too excited about something or haven't eaten a good breakfast that morning and they get lightheaded. Of course she'd just eaten lunch. It might even be something she's allergic to. You might check her out with your family doctor just to be safe."

"Oh we will," I assured her as I pretended to help Kimberly to her feet.

By the time we reached the parking lot, Kimberly was giggling. "Be quiet!" I warned her. "We don't want anyone to know we're faking it."

She jumped in the back seat and fastened her seat belt. "They wouldn't think that. I'm a little girl. I'm supposed to change my mood every hour or I'll get bored."

"She's got that right," Marty laughed. "That's just about the way I was when I was a girl her age." That sounded so strange coming from the very masculine man.

"So what do we do now?" Kimberly wanted to know.

"Well," I told her, "first we see how well things went at the restaurant and then we go home."

"Can we get something to eat first? I passed out before dessert."

"A sweet tooth, eh?" I chided her.

"It's better than drugs. Besides, I'm a growing girl."

Yes, I thought, but not for much longer if we are successful.

We got back to the restaurant just in time to see Professor Thurmond's silver Porsche pull out of its parking space. Although we had to maintain a discreet distance, I could see that he had a passenger—a female passenger judging from the long blonde hair.

"My office isn't in that direction," Marty pointed out as he drove.

“Neither is mine,” I added. “But I do believe Professor Thurmond’s apartment is right down that street.”

They never saw us as they got out of the car and headed into his apartment. It was no wonder. Even from our vantage point nearly a block away, we could see them holding onto each other as they walked to his door. I had a hunch he’d be calling me to tell me to cancel his afternoon appointments due to an unexpected illness. Marty would probably have a similar message on his own machine when he returned to the office.

“Let’s go celebrate!” Kimberly suggested happily.

But before either Marty or I could reply, our thoughts were interrupted as a police car pulled in right behind us.

“Now what?” Marty moaned as an officer stepped out of the car. Turning around, I saw it was that strange Officer Mercer. I knew Ovid was a small town and Mercury was supposed to be speedy as all get out, but couldn’t the gods afford more than one patrol officer?

Of course they could, I realized suddenly. “He’s going to take us to The Judge,” I announced.

“How do you know that?” Marty asked.

I grinned. “Woman’s intuition.”

“Good day, folks.” Marty had already rolled down the window to receive the officer. Officer Mercer seemed in a good mood.

“Officer Mercer,” Marty replied coolly.

“The Judge would like to see all of you right now. If you’ll just follow me.” He didn’t wait for an answer but instead sauntered back to his car and pulled out into the lane. Marty followed without a question. After all, what else could we do but follow?

Our ride to the courthouse was strangely quiet. I couldn’t speak for Marty or Kimberly, but I do know what was going through my own mind. I knew that this was truly the end of *Interossiter*. When we were transformed, we might all look different and in Gordy’s case not even

remember who we been, but we were still together—just as we had been for most of the time since college. Now that was about to change.

Gordy, of course, was stuck as Allie. Allie hadn't even been given the option to change again. I suppose even if any of Gordy still survived, he had been immersed so deeply into the psyche of a young girl that it would have been traumatic for her to change again and would have served no purpose. Gordy had become a bright, intelligent girl, and every now and then I saw just enough of Gordy's old mannerisms in her to make me believe that at least something of Gordy survived even if not on a conscious level.

Marty was deep in thought behind the wheel. I was pretty sure Marty would ask The Judge to not change him. Boop had turned into a pretty good man, I thought. In fact, he made a better man than a woman. The bitterness Boop exhibited for much of the time I knew her was gone. Sometimes—no, most of the time—I had wondered what had ever attracted me to Boop. Now I knew. In Marty, I saw all the good qualities of Boop without the bitterness that had ruined her life.

The reason? Marty liked women every bit as much as Boop had, and now he had the full package to offer a woman. Marty was a thoughtful and capable lover; I knew that from firsthand experience. I think I would have gone crazy at the prospect of having sex as a woman, but with Marty's experience in making love to women that he had gained as Boop, it hadn't been so bad. In fact, it had been pretty good. All right, it had been some of the most enjoyable sex I had ever experienced—as long as I left the blowjob out.

As for Kimberly, I knew she had her misgivings about the new roles we were to be given, but I had no doubts that she would still jump at the chance to become male again. After all, who would want to be a six-year-old girl?

I had to admit, though, she had done well at it. I had seen a side of Jess I had never known existed. Instead of the helpless but talented musician who had screwed up his life beyond any hope of redemption, I had been introduced to an intelligent, clever person who had come

up with the plan that had saved the day for us. She actually seemed to enjoy her time as a little girl, but I was sure she would not turn down the chance to be a nearly-adult male.

So it would be just Jess and I changing to our male identities once more. We'd be friends; of that I was sure. I looked forward to developing a friendship with Jess. As band members, we had never been close. It was hard to get close to a junkie. And after a time, he would realize that his fears about the roles we were to be given were groundless. After all, it was virtually impossible to be a junkie in Ovid.

So there it was I thought, as we pulled up in front of the courthouse. *Interossiter* would be split right down the middle. Half of it would become half of the Pearson family. Meanwhile, Kimberly and Donna Pearson would become two high school boys set to face the world. It wouldn't be so bad, would it—to be a high school boy once more? No, it would be good.

So why didn't it feel as if it would be good?

I had a choice to make, too, I realized as I accompanied my family and Officer Mercer into the courtroom. It wasn't a simple matter of accepting my new male body and moving on with a new life. I had thought it would be. But the last few days had actually been rewarding in a perverse sort of way. I had loved Boop at one time, and I had been devastated when I found that she could never love me as a man. But by the time I had realized that, our fates had been irrevocably tied together by the band. I thought I had grown to hate her, but I realized now that it wasn't hate—it was frustration. It was that I had found the person I felt I was meant to be with and couldn't manage the relationship because of the way Boop was wired.

All that had changed over the last few days. Boop, as Marty, still loved women, or maybe he even loved them more since Boop had very few relationships with women in spite of her sexual inclinations. As for me... well, I had forged an unconscious partnership with Marty. The purpose of it was to get back something resembling our old lives—or so I thought. Maybe the real purpose was just to cope with the changes that had been made to our lives. And I had sealed that partnership

with Marty by being the woman he wanted me to be.

But I wasn't really a woman, was I? Sure, I looked like one and had acted like one all the time I had been in Ovid. While I could joke around Kimberly, I had even managed to be the dutiful mother around Allie. To be honest, it hadn't even been that difficult. With the magical automatic help, I had been able to act and look the part to perfection, but underneath it all, I was still really Grant Douglas.

Wasn't I?

The Judge was already seated when we entered the courtroom, flanked by Susan and Cindy, my two new friends. Each of the women gave me an encouraging smile. Would they—could they—still be my friends when I was a teenage boy and they were adult women? It didn't seem likely.

"Well, it seems you have managed to do what needed to be done," The Judge said somewhat blandly, almost as if he was a little disappointed that we had succeeded. Or perhaps he just didn't care. Who knew what went on inside the mind of a god?

"There are suitable candidates available to take over the lives you three have occupied," he continued. "They will take your roles tomorrow morning. Now, I suppose you're anxious to get on with your new lives so..."

"Your Honor!"

It was Marty who interrupted him. I closed my eyes. I knew what he was going to say after all.

"Yes, Mr. Pearson?" The Judge's voice was polite, but there was sharp steel in his tone. I nearly shuddered to think about what The Judge could do if angered, and Marty seemed to have set him off on that path.

"Your Honor, I would like to request that I be allowed to stay as Marty Pearson."

"Mr. Pearson," The Judge began, "I am well aware of your original sexual orientation. But as you may have gathered, I frown on such

activities. I can assure you that once you are in your new female body, you will find yourself very naturally attracted to men, so there is no need for you to remain male.”

“It’s... it’s not just the sex.” Unconsciously, he looked at me as he said that, causing me to blush. “It’s much more than that.”

The Judge settled back in his chair. “Perhaps you’d better explain then.”

“I’m needed here.”

An insurance man... needed?

“You see I’ve never really had a place to call home. My parents moved around a lot and then with all the travelling the band has done, I’ve never really felt anyplace was home. Here though, I’ve got a business, people know me and seem to like me. Some of them have even suggested I run for City Council next year. Then there’s my family.” He looked back at Kimberly and me. “I know only Allie will be the same, but I like having a family. I like coming home to them, providing for them...”

As his voice trailed off, I found my eyes were misting just a little. I had loved Boop to no purpose, often wondering what I saw in her. Now, as she stood before me as Marty Pearson, I realized what it was.

“Very well, Mr. Pearson,” The Judge sighed. “If you are satisfied as you are, I see no reason to change you further. Consider this your life. Use it wisely.”

“I will, Your Honor.”

I was happy for him. Of course, it came as no surprise and I would miss him terribly, but I was nonetheless happy for him. So our group would be split in half... forever. It saddened me more than I could imagine.

“And Miss Kimberly Pearson,” The Judge intoned. “I would imagine from your outburst the other day that you would like to be changed into a man again. The young man I’ve selected for you should meet your requirements.”

“Uh... Your Honor?” Kimberly asked, sounding for all the world like the six-year-old girl she appeared to be.

“Yes, Ms. Pearson?”

“I... I think I’d like to stay as Kimberly—if it’s all right with you.”

My knees weakened and I nearly collapsed in surprise. I knew she had had her concerns that The Judge was trying to trap us, but the opportunity to get out of her tiny body should have been more than enough to sway her to take The Judge’s offer.

“Of course it’s all right with me,” The Judge said in a kindly tone. “But would you mind telling me why?”

She actually swayed back and forth a little as she spoke, just as a natural if precocious little girl might do. “Well, Your Honor, at first I thought you were trying to play a mean trick on us—changing us into people like I remembered from my teen years. I thought you were trying to get us to be druggies just like those people—and me.”

“Surely you don’t believe that,” the Judge responded. “You must have found out by now that there are no drugs in Ovid. They aren’t allowed.”

“I realize that now, Your Honor,” she agreed. “But then I realized that no matter what man I became, I’d still be Jess. I’ve had a chance to view who I used to be from the outside and with a clear mind. I don’t think I like Jess very much, and any boy you turn me into just might be Jess again—even without the drugs. Then I’ve had the chance to see what you made me into. I’m smart, cute, and I have a lot of friends. I think I’d like to see if I can’t do a better job as Kimberly than I did as Jess.”

“A very admirable plan,” The Judge replied with a nod. “But there’s more to it than that isn’t there, Kimberly?”

“Yeah, there is,” she admitted. “I can’t leave Gordy—Allie, that is. He—she—took care of me for a long time. Gordy might as well have been my brother. In fact, he took better care of me than any of my real family ever did. I don’t want to leave her all alone.”

“But she won’t be alone,” The Judge pointed out. “There’ll be a new Kimberly.”

“But she wouldn’t be me,” Kimberly countered softly.

“All right, Kimberly, but this is your last chance,” The Judge warned her. “I’m going to give you one more chance to be a young man. If you refuse, you’ll be Kimberly Pearson for the rest of your life.”

She smiled at The Judge. “I refuse then, Your Honor.”

The Judge smiled back. “Very well, Kimberly.” Then he turned his attention to me. “Well Donna, it looks as if you’ll be the only one changing today, doesn’t it?”

“I guess so,” I replied dully. Of course, I was thinking about what I had just witnessed. For the last few days we had been a family. Once I had overcome the initial shock of being changed into a woman, I had actually enjoyed the routines of family life which I hadn’t experienced since I was a boy. It had been almost like a vacation to get away from the rigors of running the band, and I had been able to see a side of my long-time associates that I had never imagined before.

The problem was that I really enjoyed being male. Throughout my life, I had enjoyed an active life. I had been handsome, entertaining, virile, and for a time successful. Now I was being given the opportunity to start over again as a young, good-looking man with his future before him. It should have been my dream. So why did it taste like ashes in my mouth?

The answer was right in front of me. Allie, Kimberly, and Marty hadn’t become my family; they had been my family for many years. It’s just that somewhere along the way, we had become tired and dysfunctional as some families do. We had needed a change in our various points of view to rekindle the fires of friendship and love that had bonded us together as *Interossiter* so many years before.

“Your Honor.”

“Yes, Donna?”

“I... I think I’d like to stay this way, too.”

Kimberly gave a whoop of joy and was quickly silenced by The Judge's gavel. "Young lady, there will be no outbursts in this courtroom!"

"Yes, Your Honor," she said meekly.

The Judge turned to me. "Are you sure?"

"No, I'm not," I replied. "To be honest, I'm scared. I don't know if I can really learn to enjoy being a woman, let alone a wife and a mother. But I do know I can't leave my family." There were tears in my eyes by now. "And if being a woman is what it takes to stay with them, I'll just have to learn to deal with it."

I felt Marty's strong arm around my waist, pulling me to his side, and I felt a small hand take my hand as Kimberly came up to me with a smile.

"Then it would seem that this court has no further business," The Judge announced. "Besides, I think I'd better let you go since Allie will be home from school soon."

"Thank you, Your Honor," we all said together.

I was smiling as we exited the courtroom together. I wasn't sure how this would all turn out—being a real family and all—but I was more than willing to try.

As the trance faded, I saw that someone else had joined us. Experience had taught me that while the stories I related covered several days, the images we saw were in fact compressed into a few minutes. The Judge had come out of his office while I was relating the story of the Pearsons.

It was Diana who spoke first. "I'd say Donna's problems aren't over yet. She's still got a few problems at work with her boss. That can't possibly work out right."

"True," Susan agreed. "But it's already taken care of. Donna resigned a couple of days later. Wendy did the same thing, by the way. So

Donna is going to help Marty run his business.”

Diana smiled. “And I’ll bet Wendy applied for a position under Professor Thurmond.” Her wording was quite intentional.

Susan groaned, “Steve says it’s impossible to get any work out of her. She spends a great deal of her time in ‘private meetings’ with Jerry Thurmond.”

“What do you think, my dear?” The Judge asked. There was no question that he was asking it of his daughter, Diana.

She smiled. “I think you’re just a sentimental fool.”

That coming from a mortal might have led to life on a lily pad catching flies. For his daughter, The Judge only smiled. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean,” she told him, “that you acted as if the lives of the Pearsons were part of the Plan. You know they don’t have anything to do with it. Not only that, but what about that nonsense about the people they were supposed to be being out of town? Those people are shades, Father. You and I both know shades can’t leave town. Susan, I’m surprised he caught you on that one. He had you convinced you were giving them vital information while he was really deflecting them.”

Susan looked just a little shocked.

“All right,” The Judge actually laughed. “I’ll admit that I did it to save them from themselves, and I’ll admit I’ve always been a big fan of theirs. According to the Oracle, *Interossiter* should have been one of the biggest bands of the century. That was why I sent Eunice to help them when they were getting started. But they were too flawed to gel into the band they could have been. I decided as their deaths approached to give them one more chance to develop the bonds the Fates intended for them, albeit in a somewhat different fashion.”

Susan and I remained silent, our presence forgotten. We listened carefully, though. Mention of the Plan had caught our attention. Susan, of course, had been told that the Pearsons were important to the Plan so she could relate it to them, but apparently they weren’t. I

could see her quietly fuming as she realized The Judge had lied to her.

“Besides, they are important,” The Judge argued, almost as if he had read our thoughts. “All of our residents are in a manner of speaking.”

“Yes, but you could have given them the identities you promised them without turning them into the Pearsons first.”

“And the Pearsons would have been headed for a divorce,” The Judge pointed out.

“So?”

To my surprise, The Judge smiled. “All right, my dear. You’re right. I’ll admit it. I indulged myself this time. It had nothing to do with the Conflagration...” His voice trailed off, and for the first time in my memory, I would have to describe the look on his face as nonplussed. He had said something he had not meant to say and was not certain how to recover. At last he said, “My reasons had nothing to do with the conflagration between the Pearsons.”

It was a good recovery, but not good enough. Diana looked a little alarmed, but she too recovered quickly. “Well, it was a most enjoyable story, but I must be off to London. I have tickets to a play in the West End and curtain is in thirty minutes.” With that she vanished. There was no cloud of smoke or anything so dramatic. It was just that one second she was there and the next she wasn’t.

After a moment of silence, The Judge said, “Well, I don’t want to keep you from your work.” He turned abruptly and walked back into his office, closing the door behind him. Almost at once, I heard the sounds of Boop McCarthy and *Interossiter* emanating from what had to be the only remaining copy of ‘*What a Face*’ in the universe.

“Any clue as to what that was all about?” I asked Susan. Her many years as a top criminal attorney had given her plenty of insights into human behavior. Although The Judge and his daughter weren’t exactly human, they exhibited a great number of human traits.

“Not really,” Susan admitted. “But I can tell you this. ‘Conflagration’ is

a pretty strong term to use to describe marital difficulties. I'd say His Honor just slipped up."

After Susan left, I got a little curious about the meaning of the word, so I pulled out my dictionary and looked it up. I wasn't comforted by what I found. The word referred to a large disastrous fire. But there was another meaning of the word as well. The most troubling meaning of the word conflagration is 'war.'

Ovid XV: The Politician

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"I must see The Judge at once!"

I looked up from my desk. I had been so involved in what I had been doing that I had not even heard anyone approach. What I saw in front of me was a stern-faced woman, middle-aged with short, black hair. She wore little or no makeup and her clothes were equally plain, consisting of a long black skirt and a gray blouse which did little to hide two over-sized, drooping breasts.

"I'm sorry," I said primly in my best authoritative manner, "The Judge has given strict orders that he is not to be disturbed."

The woman frowned menacingly at me. I didn't recognize her at all. She wasn't a shade, though, so she had to be someone The Judge had transformed. But she was so unlike most of the transformees that I would have surely remembered her unless...

"Diana!"

The frown disappeared, replaced by a mischievous smile. "I almost got you that time!" Instead of the harsh voice of the middle-aged woman, the voice was cheerful and lilting. Soon, the body matched as well as her form blurred and changed until a twenty-something blonde in a very, very short white skirt and a pink tube top stood smiling in front of me.

"Diana, it's winter for God's sake. You'll freeze in that outfit."

"Hardly," she laughed, twirling a strand of long blonde hair. Then she sighed. "But I suppose I ought to look like I belong here." This time, just her clothes blurred. There were black tights on her slim legs and the tube top became a black sweater. Even the white skirt changed, becoming red plaid—but it remained almost obscenely short.

She perched on my desk in a pose that would have had me panting if I

had still been the college boy I had been when I had first arrived in Ovid. But those days were long ago. Now, the woman in me looked enviously at Diana's trim, young figure with longing. How I wished I could wear an outfit like that without looking ridiculous.

"You missed all the excitement," I told the goddess.

"Don't I always?" she returned with a mock sigh. "Thank God we have you to help us keep up on current affairs."

"Thank God or thank The Judge?"

That just got me another mischievous smile.

"So don't you want to know what story I want to see?"

"I think it's pretty obvious this time; don't you?"

"Well," she allowed, "I suppose it is pretty obvious. Besides, as slow as things have been around here lately, I'm surprised you're still here."

"We won't be in a couple of days," I told her. "The whole family is going to Disney World for Christmas. There are no more trials scheduled until after the holidays. In fact, Susan and her family are already on vacation in the Bahamas."

"I know," Diana replied. "I had lunch with Susan in Nassau."

"When?"

She looked at her watch. "Oh, about half an hour ago. She told me all about the big flap."

"Big is the word for it," I agreed. "Are you ready to see it?"

"Hit it!"

"Okay," I said, already falling into my trance...

"So what's the story on Tulsa?" I asked, rubbing my eyes.

"You're not going to Tulsa until tonight," Tony told me, shoving a file across the small table that separated his seat from mine. The file

drooped over the tiny table, but I guess it was difficult to have much of a table on a plane as small as ours. “You have a luncheon with the Chamber of Commerce in Muskogee. Then we fly to Tulsa after you take a tour of the Port of Muskogee.”

“Oh, right,” I nodded. After a breakfast in Enid and a teleconference with the State Party Headquarters in Oklahoma City, my brain was already fried, and it wasn’t even noon for another hour and a half. I rubbed my temples, my head pounding.

“Is it bad this time?” Tony asked with concern on his ruggedly handsome face.

“I’ll live,” I assured him. Tony just nodded. I was grateful that Tony said no more about my headache. He knew how serious they could get, but he also knew I didn’t like to be coddled. Tony would have made a good Marine, and that was the highest compliment I could give anyone. He would have been a great adjutant for a senior officer—always organized and never ruffled. Of course, that made him a great assistant for a politician as well. “So what’s the scoop on Muskogee?” I asked him, opening the file.

Tony shrugged. “The usual for this part of the state. Farming is important. Also, they’ve got light manufacturing and a couple of colleges. And don’t forget the Port. They do a lot of shipments in and out by barge down to the Gulf. That means they’re interested in foreign trade as well.”

I groaned, “In other words, everything is important to them. You didn’t mention oil though.” I had actually managed a little smile when I pointed that out.

“Oil goes without saying,” he replied. And he was right. There really wasn’t a place in Oklahoma that wasn’t interested in oil and oil policy. Hell, there’s even a working oil well on the State Capitol grounds. No matter what the future had in store for Oklahoma, it was oil that had put the state on the map—literally. Before oil was discovered in the state, it just seemed like a worthless place to be foisted off on the Indians.

I started to ask another question, but the plane bumped suddenly.

“What was that?” Penny called nervously from her seat at the rear of the plane. Penny Dumont was a fine secretary but a nervous flyer. She always insisted on sitting at the rear of the plane where she was usually perched—as she was just then—with a cell phone in hand while she lined up all the details of the campaign that were essential on the whole but individually too small for Tony to worry about.

“What was that?” Tony repeated to the pilot over the intercom.

“Probably just clear air turbulence,” the pilot responded with an Oklahoma twang so rich it made the rest of us sound like a bunch of Yankees.

“Probably?” Tony pressed. There was a lot couched in that one-word question. What Tony was really reminding the pilot was that one of his passengers was Conrad Williams—me—Member of Congress and (hopefully) the next governor of the State of Oklahoma, so the pilot had better make sure it was just clear air turbulence and ‘probably’ wasn’t good enough.

“Uh...” the pilot began. Then he murmured, “Just a minute.”

Whatever distracted him was enough to make me worry. As a Marine officer, I had been a passenger in a lot of aircraft and I had known a lot of pilots. Dusty Osborne was a damned good pilot, having flown F-18s in the Gulf War. He still flew Reserve at least a couple of days a month and was just the sort of pilot you wanted flying you in a rented aircraft into every little dirt strip airport in the state.

I gripped the sides of my seat, reluctantly remembering a plane ride during the Gulf War that had cost me my military career. It would be more than a little ironic if another one were to cost me my political career—or worse yet, my life.

The ride during the Gulf War was on a chopper, churning through the heavy, hot air of Southern Iraq. I was a captain then—an officer expected to go places once my tour of combat was over. I had already been selected for major, and duty at the Pentagon was just a few

weeks away. Ironically, the sortie into Iraq was to have been my last mission. It was, but not the way I expected.

We were in the process of setting down, every man checking his equipment when the blast hit us. It was a hand-held antiaircraft missile—probably Russian manufacture from what the experts could later determine. The blast was the loudest thing I ever heard, even drowning out the noise of the rotors.

“Jesus!” The pilot’s mike was open, and it was easy to tell from his voice that we had a serious problem. Sure enough—out the hatch we were due to embark from we spotted a squad of Iraqi soldiers. They were hopped up from their success hitting the chopper, and I could see them getting ready to fire another one at us.

Now in the war movies, this is where the bright young Marine captain leaps twenty feet to the ground surrounded by his unit as they dutifully wipe out the enemy force before further damage can be done. Real life doesn’t work that way. First of all, it wasn’t even my decision. Until we were on the ground, the pilot was in charge. Calling at us to secure ourselves, he turned quickly and flew our sorry asses out of there. We could hear the whump of another missile exploding just off our port side.

We made it back to base, but it was a rough ride, and the chopper was pretty badly shot up. The landing was brutal, the gear of the chopper severely damaged. It caused the bird to collapse on the runway, tilting far enough to one side to shatter the rotor and send pieces of it flying into the belly of the aircraft exactly where we were located. I didn’t even see the part that hit me, but I felt it slamming into my head. I was out cold before I could even scream.

When I came to in a hospital in Germany, I found out that the good news was that everyone had survived. The bad news was that nearly everyone had suffered some injury, and four of us had been in bad enough shape to require evacuation to Germany for surgery. I was now the proud owner of a metal plate in my skull that would give me headaches the rest of my life, ruin my military career, and make going through airport security a living hell.

Fortunately, there had been an answer to the second part of my dilemma. My wife's father was a political bigwig with the party back home in Oklahoma, and they had a tough Congressional race coming up in a few months. A war hero might be just right for the district which had shown little loyalty to either party lately.

A word about Oklahoma politics—traditionally Democrat for a number of years, the state has become more Republican with each passing year. Republicans now control the Governor's office, both US Senate seats, and five of the six US House seats while the Democrats control the State Legislature. In such a volatile political environment, it helps to have a little something extra—like being a sports figure or a war hero. Did I mention that before I went into the Marine Corps I played first string on the University of Oklahoma football team?

So there it was. With the right introductions from my father-in-law, I was able to move into a district where my background would make a difference. I didn't even have more than token opposition in the primaries. As for the general election, I squeaked into office for my first two-year term, but in the three terms since, I've won walking away.

I suppose if I had been willing to rest on my laurels, I could have stayed in the House for many more years. Some people did it, including Carl Albert, an Oklahoma Congressman who served as Speaker of the House for six years. But I had my eye on bigger things, and for all its collective power, the House of Representatives wasn't the place for someone like me to stay forever.

At the risk of making a political speech, there were problems in our country I wanted to fix. To my way of thinking, the country had been drifting for a while, and presidents from either party hadn't done much to change that. That's right—I planned on being President of the United States someday.

But the problem was how to get there. If I did, it wasn't going to be from my present position. No individual had been elected directly from the House to the Presidency in over a century. For that matter, no president had been elected directly from the Senate since John F.

Kennedy. No, the place to be elected from was the governorship. Four of the last six presidents had been elected after being governors of their states, and since Ford had been appointed, that meant that four of the last five elected presidents had been governors.

It made a lot of sense when you thought about it. Governors could portray themselves as executives just like the president while legislators were constantly having to defend their records on the issues. There were too many contentious issues in the land now to allow a legislator to vote either way without pissing off the at least half of the electorate. Current political thinking was to run for office from the middle of the political spectrum, and that was damned hard to do when being a legislator meant being forced to take a stand on issues that were almost always either too far left or right.

I had waited for the right time to run. Our governor had no desire to be president, but the US Senate looked mighty good to him. With one of our senators ready to retire, he was ready to surrender the governor's chair, and I was ready to seize it. But it wasn't going to be easy this time. I had opposition within my own party from an elected state official who originally came from one of Oklahoma's larger cities while my district was mostly rural. He would be a tough man to beat.

But beat him I would. Travelling from one end of the state to the other had allowed me to sneak up on him in the polls. As of that moment, it looked as if I would get my party's nomination with a win of almost sixty percent in the primary. But the electorate was fickle, and with the primary only a few days away, I hadn't let up on my schedule. I would be governor, and that would just be the next step on the way to the presidency itself.

My dreams of power were interrupted as the plane shook again—this time harder than before. “Dusty, what the hell is going on up there?” I yelled into the intercom.

“Just rough air,” Dusty replied. “Don't worry; I just got permission to go to a lower altitude. We were about ready to start our approach anyway and—shit!”

The plane didn't bump this time. It just began to roll over. All I could think of was how ironic it was that I had survived one air crash and was now about to be in another one. The difference was that this one would be hard to walk away from. I knew just enough about planes to know that Dusty had just lost control of the bird. How or why didn't matter; what mattered was that in a few seconds, we'd be in an uncontrollable spin and there would be nothing to stop us from hitting the ground.

I suppose most men would have used those final moments to think about their families. Not me, though. My wife Louise and I craved the same thing—power. We hadn't craved anything from each other in years. We had no children—Louise didn't want any—so there was no son or daughter to think about, and my parents had been dead for several years. Add to that the fact that my brothers and I weren't very close and there was no one back home to think about.

Instead, I thought about what might have been. I thought about the vision I had for a new America—strong and vibrant, leading the world to a better tomorrow. That was even part of my campaign slogan: 'A Better Tomorrow Today!' Well, all the great campaign slogans in the world wouldn't trim one knot off the airspeed of our crippled plane.

I heard Penny yelp, as there was the unexpected feeling of our butts being squished into the leather seats of the plane as it suddenly changed attitude and levelled out. "Thank God!" Tony exclaimed, saying out loud what all of us had just been thinking. Dusty had just proven himself to be one hell of a pilot.

As the plane smoothed out, I unlocked my seat belt and hunching over, so my six-two frame could walk down the aisle, made my way into the cockpit. I put my hand on Dusty's shoulder. "Great work, my friend."

Dusty took a hand off the controls long enough to brush a shock of short red hair out of his face. "Thank you, sir, but I had nothing to do with it."

I frowned. "What are you saying? Planes don't just right themselves."

“I’d usually agree with you, sir, but not this time. And to make it worse, nothing I seem to do to the controls changes anything. I was sure it was a complete hydraulic failure. It’s almost as if someone else is flying the plane.”

I looked at the controls. I could read the instruments well enough to notice that we were starting to lose altitude. I mentioned that to Dusty. He nodded in agreement. “You’re right, sir. But it’s a gentle controlled descent. We seem to be heading for that valley up ahead.”

I looked out the cockpit windscreen at the valley Dusty had referred to. The valley was long and wide, nestled between two ridges of moderately-sized hills. At first glance, its lush farm fields, sparkling lakes and wooded glades appeared to be much like any other valley that might have stretched from the eastern part of Oklahoma all the way to the Atlantic Coast. But a more careful look showed an odd difference or two. First of all and most disturbing were the hills themselves. Both of the ridges appeared to be virtually identical, as if they were mirror images of each other.

As for the other difference, there seemed to be fewer roads than might be expected. Viewed from above, most of the farm states are laid out with section roads crisscrossing each other with predictable regularity. The impression from above was one of squares, like some gigantic green checkerboard with the color in each square often varying according to the crops being raised there. This valley had fewer roads at irregular intervals, and none crossed over the hills. In fact, the only through road appeared to be a ribbon of asphalt that crossed the hills at one end of the valley where the hills seemed to almost end. It snaked its way southward into the town, curving off in mirror-like fashion at the south extremity of the municipality and crossing another low-lying hill beyond.

I pointed out at a shape in the distance. “There! That looks like an airport south of town just off the highway.”

“I think you’re right,” Dusty replied. “The problem is none of my charts show an airport there.”

“Maybe you have an old chart,” I suggested.

Dusty looked at me with thinly-disguised disgust. “No pilot would carry old charts; it’s suicidal. And it isn’t just the airport that’s not on the charts. I don’t see any sign of this town or even this valley. According to the charts, there’s a single ridge of hills that rises up about here and ends a few miles south of where that town is parked.”

“What are you saying, Dusty?” I asked, unwilling to accept what he had just told me.

“I’m telling you there shouldn’t be a town down there. I’ve flown over this region dozens of times. I might have missed a little place with a few dozen residents, but that town out there looks to be ten thousand or so. I’ve never seen it before.”

I felt a chill run up and down my spine. Dusty wasn’t the sort of pilot given to letting his imagination run away with him. If he said there shouldn’t be a town down there, then that was that. But it was impossible to refute the evidence of our eyes. Perhaps, I thought, we had been knocked off course. Perhaps Dusty wasn’t where he thought we should be. Yes, that had to be the answer. But we would have to discuss it later. Right now there was a more pressing problem—namely, how to get safely on the ground in an aircraft that seemed to have a mind of its own.

“Can we make it to the airport?” I asked.

“I doubt it,” was the reply. “But that road down there looks pretty smooth and straight. We seem to be heading right for it. In fact, when I nudge the controls that way, I seem to have some control. I’m going to try to set her down there. You’d better strap in.”

I made my way back into the cabin, telling Tony and Penny to belt in while I did so myself. I wasn’t too worried actually. Dusty seemed to have at least enough control to get us on the ground safely. In fact, all I could think about was what a great news story this would make. It was a shame my press secretary was in Oklahoma City where my wife was hosting a forum on women’s issues designed to give me a little more strength with the women’s vote.

Penny was a wreck, nervously patting her blond hair which she always wore in a tight bun that took nothing away from her beauty. I watched her appreciatively as she straightened her white skirt to cover a bit more of her tanned legs. Don't get me wrong, though. Looking was all I ever did, in spite of what my wife thought. My name was Williams—not Condit.

Tony was trying to look as if he had more important things to worry about. I suppose he did—getting me elected. Tony had handled every campaign for me. He matched me in height and was actually better looking and a little younger. I was at first surprised that Tony didn't want to run for office himself, but he preferred to manage the campaigns of others instead.

The plane made a descent so smooth I almost felt as if I was flying a normal route on a major airliner. Dusty had to be wrong about the hydraulics, I thought. No plane could make so smooth an approach with a major hydraulic problem. We were in the pipe on a smooth descent right down to the highway below.

Out the window, I could see that there was indeed a problem. We were landing with the flaps up in a cruising position. I hoped there were no cars on that highway out there because without flaps, the plane was going to take forever to get stopped. Sure, there were brakes, but we would be landing at an unusually high speed—or so I thought.

Although the flaps never extended, the plane slowed as it neared the ground, an apparent contradiction in aviation theory and practice. True, Dusty had his nose up as far as he could, but we should have been moving a lot faster when the wheels dug into the asphalt highway.

Tony noticed it, too. "What's slowing us down?" he asked to no one in particular. I was too busy watching the ground rush up to answer, and Penny was just doing everything she could to keep from wetting her pants. I couldn't say that I blamed her.

The plane skidded a little from side-to-side as Dusty applied the

brakes, but it wasn't too bad. After all, we had lost most of our airspeed. The section of road we had landed on was perfectly smooth, and apparently, we hadn't met any cars on the ground. We all breathed a sigh of relief as Dusty cut back on the engines and veered the plane off the highway onto a smooth gravel shoulder.

"Okay folks," he called over the intercom. "That's one more we get to walk away from."

None of us moved until the plane came to a slightly bumpy stop at the side of the road. The right wing, I noticed, hung out over a shallow gully along the side of the road, but the wheels had come to rest along relatively level ground. Still, we remained in our seats until the engines stopped completely and Randy's head appeared at the cockpit door.

"Okay, it's safe now," he told us.

We exited the plane and were hit at once with the warm, muggy air of an Oklahoma summer. The smell of residual exhaust from the engines and the odors from the baking asphalt mixed with the pungent smell of weeds, trees and crops which made up the visible countryside. I loosened my tie at once just to be a little cooler. Tony kept his tight though, as if he expected reporters from all the major networks to drive up any minute.

"Any idea where we are, Dusty?" I asked.

Our pilot just shrugged. "Like I told you, this valley shouldn't be here. Neither should that town."

"What town?" Penny asked. She was shifting her weight back and forth from leg to leg to try to keep from having her heels sink into the warm asphalt.

I nodded to the south. "It's that way. I suppose we should start walking."

Before anyone could say another word, we heard the sound of at least one car and maybe more approaching from the direction of town. We couldn't see them since there was a small rise in our line of vision, but from the sound of the engines, they were speeding toward us. Then

we saw them—a white sedan followed by a white minivan—and both of them had red and blue lights flashing.

“Well, it looks as if we’re going to have an official welcome,” Tony mused. “Congressman, it might be a good idea if you straightened your tie and looked official.”

I returned the grin he gave me and pulled my regulation sincerely red politician’s tie back into a semblance of a professional knot. I wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the mouth, but I got a strange feeling when an officer got out of the first police car. Actually, I suppose the strange feeling started when I saw ‘City of Ovid’ in blue letters on the side of the car. I had never heard of the City of Ovid, and for a man running for governor of the state, that wasn’t natural since the town he seemed to have come from was certainly large enough for any state-wide politician to take note of. But the officer himself made me feel even stranger. I couldn’t really say why because he looked perfectly normal in his gray-blue uniform and mirrored sunglasses.

Then I realized what the problem was. I would have expected any police officer first on the scene of an emergency landing like ours to look first at the plane and then at us, but he didn’t. It was as if the plane held no interest for him—as if he expected it to be there and had already dismissed it as part of the background. Instead, he focused on us. “Mr. Williams?” he addressed me.

“How... how do you know who I am?” I stammered.

“We received your pilot’s distress call,” he explained. “We’ve been tracking you since you got close to Ovid.”

“I see...” I replied slowly, but I really didn’t see. Track us? With what? Small towns don’t have elaborate radar systems. I should have known. After all, I sat on the House Transportation Committee. Small towns the size of Ovid were lucky if they had a paved runway and runway lights.

“Now, if you’ll all just step into the van, we’ll get you into town,” he told us, motioning at the van which had pulled up behind his car. The van door was already open.

“Can you get word to our people in Oklahoma City?” Tony asked the officer, who I noted wore a nametag which proclaimed him to be Officer Mercer.

“We’ve notified everyone who needs to know,” Officer Mercer replied drolly. Tony, Penny and I all nodded, but it wasn’t until we were in the van that I realized he hadn’t exactly told us who had been notified.

“I’d like to stay here and look over the plane,” Dusty said to the officer.

“The plane will be safe here,” he was told. “The Judge wants to see all of you now, so if you’ll just get in the van...”

“The Judge?” I asked. Then I realized what was going on. Some local judge wanted to meet with me. After all, I stood a good chance of being the next governor, and every local political figure would want to meet me. There’d be appointments I’d have to make, and who better to appoint than some local judge who had agreed to support me in my campaign. “Oh, of course. That’s fine, officer. We’ll be happy to meet with your judge. But you would be doing us a great favor if you’d let us use the van to continue on to Muskogee.”

Officer Mercer was tall enough that he could actually look slightly down at me, and I could swear that I saw amusement in his face.

“That will be up to The Judge,” he informed me.

“I understand,” I replied, not realizing that I didn’t understand at all.

The trip into the town of Ovid was uneventful. What I saw from my vantage point in the front passenger seat of the van was a small Oklahoma town, different from most other towns of its size only in that it seemed to take a greater pride in its appearance. Most small towns are dying—unless of course they are close enough to larger cities to become attractive suburbs. Not Ovid, though. Signs of prosperity were everywhere from the freshly painted homes and neatly trimmed lawns to the prosperous-looking shops and other businesses along the way.

Even the people of Ovid were more prosperous looking. In most small towns (and most larger cities for that matter) business attire had given

way to casual, and casual had declined into sloppy. In Ovid, people were better groomed, as if someone had published standards of neatness that everyone had agreed to follow. Oh that didn't mean there weren't people dressed casually, but there were more suits and ties on the men and more skirts and heels on the women than I would have expected.

I glanced over at our driver. She was an attractive young black woman, wearing a women's equivalent of the uniform the stolid Officer Mercer wore. I glanced down at her nametag trying not to be seen as staring at her superb breasts. Her name, I saw, was Hazleton. "Officer Hazleton..." I began.

She smiled never taking her deep brown eyes off the road. "Call me Wanda, please."

"Wanda then," I started over, pleased that she was much more open than Officer Mercer. I was glad he was in his police cruiser instead of accompanying us in the van. It was more relaxing that way. "Ovid looks mighty prosperous. What do people do for a living around here?"

She laughed, "Oh, it's a typical small town. There's a lot of good farmland around. Retail business is pretty good, too. And of course, there's Vulman Industries."

That got my attention. "Vulman has a plant here? I thought they were located in Tulsa." In my time on the House Transportation Committee, I had heard the name Vulman a number of times. The company had developed a number of cutting edge products that were finding their way into the aviation industry. One of those products promised to add to the efficiency of aircraft engines, increasing range and thus lowering fuel costs. Some people had even talked about extending the technology to automobiles, cutting our dependence on oil dramatically.

"Actually, Vulman is headquartered in Ovid. Tulsa's just a sales office. Eric Vulman himself lives right here in town."

That was news to me. I wondered how something as important as that could have escaped my notice. I'd have to get on Tony about that.

Ovid was starting to appear to be a much more important place than I had imagined. For that matter, why hadn't I even heard of Ovid? Looking at the buildings as we sped by, it was obvious that the town was at least ten thousand and growing. What kind of a governor would I be if I didn't even know about a town as large and important as Ovid?

"Here we are," Wanda said as we pulled into the parking lot in front of gray granite building with impressive columns in front. The words 'City Hall' were solemnly carved into the granite above the columns. It was as neat and impressive as the rest of Ovid, with the Oklahoma flag fluttering in the warm, light breeze next to the US flag in the grassy area in front of the building.

"You have a very nice town here, Wanda," I told her with my best politician's smile. "It's the sort of town I'd be proud to call home."

She laughed softly for some reason I couldn't fathom just then. "I'm glad you feel that way, sir."

Officer Mercer was just climbing out of his car, and Wanda went over to talk to him while Tony, Penny, Dusty and I huddled.

"Tony, why wasn't I briefed on Ovid?" I asked him, not too unkindly. "Did you know this is where Vulman Industries is headquartered?"

"It shouldn't be," he replied insistently. "In fact the whole town shouldn't even be here."

"And did you see those weird people?" Penny chimed in, nearly shivering in spite of the warmth.

"What weird people?" I asked. "Penny, what the hell are you talking about?"

"The transparent ones. The ones you could see through," Dusty explained. Then to Penny, he nodded. "Yeah, I saw them, too."

"Wait a minute," I growled. "What..."

I never got any further. Officer Mercer had sent Wanda into the building and returned his attention to us. "The Judge wants to see you right away," he told us. That was fine with me. The sooner we saw

him, the sooner we'd be on our way. Although I wondered if I could get a chance to see the elusive Eric Vulman. His support—both moral and financial—of my campaign would be a big boost toward putting me in the Governor's chair in the fall.

In retrospect, perhaps I should have realized there was something strange going on. After all, planes don't fly themselves, and towns didn't normally escape Tony's notice. Perhaps I could be forgiven for not taking Penny seriously, though. Her talk of transparent people was pretty far out. All I had seen walking down the street were dozens and dozens of potential voters.

As we walked into the courtroom together, I took on the usual appearance of a seasoned politician, casual and friendly, complete with a dazzling smile. I had expected to be welcomed to the courtroom as an honored guest, shake a few hands, listen to how the local roads really needed state dollars, and be on my way. I never expected to be put on trial.

The Judge was already at the bench, a stern look on his handsome, middle-aged face. He was impatiently stroking his beard of brown peppered with gray as he watched us with steely blue eyes barely shielded by expensive gold-rimmed glasses.

"If the defendants will take their seats at the table with their attorney, we can get on with this trial," he remarked firmly.

As a member of Congress, I was quite unaccustomed to being talked to in such a fashion. My casual gait at once became a ramrod-straight stance as I began in a tone petulantly enough to match The Judge's tone, "Your Honor, what is this all about? We have just narrowly avoided an aircraft accident and are hardly in a mood for ill-conceived jokes."

The Judge's eyes caught fire. "A joke? You think landing an aircraft on a public roadway, endangering our citizens, is a joke, sir?"

"We had no choice..." Dusty began but I silenced him at once. I'd do the talking here.

“My pilot is correct,” I told The Judge as an attractive woman at the defense table I took to be our court-appointed attorney looked on in shock. “We were forced down when our plane developed trouble.”

“I’m aware of the circumstances,” The Judge told me, his manner only slightly less confrontational. Apparently he was used to having his own way. Well, most judges are. “That does not change the facts. How do you plead?”

“Plead?” I practically yelled. “What are you talking ab...”

“You are in contempt of court, sir!”

“I don’t recognize the authority of this court in this matter!” I shot back.

It was then, standing directly before that magistrate certain that I could make him back down that I froze. I don’t mean I lost my nerve; I mean I literally froze in place, unable to move or utter a sound. It was as if the messages from my brain were not reaching my limbs. I could feel beads of sweat breaking out on my forehead.

The Judge’s eyes narrowed. “In the absence of a plea from you, I must find you guilty of the charges. You are all guilty!”

I sensed that the rest of my party was also immobile, although I could barely see them out of the corner of one eye as they stood next to the attorney at the table to my left. I could hear them gasping for some reason as The Judge muttered something which sounded like a foreign language—almost like Latin and Italian all mixed together.

It was really creepy, and I was all nervous just standing there while Marsha and Susan watched on from the gallery. I mean, what if they told their moms and they told my mom? I had to plead so hard with her to get the car go visit the campus that day. I’d probably never be allowed to drive her car again until I was thirty!

I tugged a little at my skirt. Why had I worn such a short one that day? The Judge had looked at me as if I were some sort of tart or something. I mean, it was like fashionable and all and really, really nice, but The Judge had looked at me sort of like the way dad always looked at me when I wore that skirt on a date. And then there were

those people standing there with me. What were they doing there? They were adults, all dressed in suits and dresses and they were looking at me as if I had just landed from Mars. Jeez folks, get a grip. The skirt wasn't all that short...

"But under the circumstances, young lady, I've decided to suspend your fine for careless driving."

I couldn't believe The Judge was really saying that! I mean, yeah, I had been a little careless when I turned into that one-way street, but how was I to know it? I mean, the street wasn't even marked or anything. So okay, maybe it was marked and I just didn't see it because all three of us were so busy watching that really hunky guy walking across campus. God, if just ten percent of the guys at Capta looked like him, I was going to really, really like going to school there.

"But if you ever show up in my courtroom again, Ms. Stewart, I can promise you I won't be as lenient!"

I barely heard his lecture, but the crack of his gavel brought me back to earth. I looked around and smiled at Marsha and Susan in the gallery. They smiled back at me. I glanced down at my watch. We could still make lunch someplace. I hadn't seen a Mickey D's when we got into town, but there was this place called Rusty's Burger Barn that looked pretty cool...

I think I actually screamed when I woke up. My breasts were heaving and felt almost unnatural on my chest. I reflexively reached inside my pajama top and touched one just to assure myself that they were normal. I cringed as I halfway expected my chest to be flat and covered in coarse hair, but the breast was smooth, full and normal.

Normal.

I looked about in the dark, gasping softly as I saw a dark shape approaching me. It sat down on my bed, the additional weight nearly causing me to lose my balance. A small hand grasped my bare arm. "April honey, are you all right?"

I breathed a little sigh of relief as I recognized the sweet, soft voice of

Laurel Jacobson, my roommate in the sorority. "Yeah, I'm fine," I mumbled, not really believing it.

"Same dream again?"

Her question reminded me that I had awakened for the last three nights from nightmares. The difference was that on that night, I remembered what had frightened me after I had awakened. "I think so," I replied slowly.

"Do you remember any of it?"

I shook my head. "No." It was a lie, of course, but how was I supposed to tell my roommate—a girl who had been my friend for over two years ever since I had started school at Capta College—that I was having a bad dream about being a... a... man?

Laurel hesitated for a moment and then asked, "It doesn't have anything to do with Paul, does it?"

I shook my head again. Paul had been my boyfriend ever since last year's spring semester. We had hit it off well from the start and had even written each other over the summer when I had gone home to Tulsa. As the fall semester began, we had picked up where we had left off and soon were... intimate. It was wonderful while it lasted, but our relationship cooled with the coming of winter. I had been looking for love; Paul was looking for sex. When I pushed him for a commitment, he dropped me in a heartbeat. A tear came to my eye. I thought the big shit actually loved me.

"Well, I know it's not your period," Laurel announced lightly. No, it wasn't. I had had my last one over a week ago. It hadn't even been a particularly bad one.

"Maybe you should see a doctor or something," Laurel ventured as she rubbed my back.

"I'll be okay," I assured her, smiling bravely until I realized she probably couldn't see the smile in the dark.

"All right," she agreed reluctantly, standing up to be silhouetted in the moonlight. "Try to get some sleep."

“Okay.” I sank back down on my pillow, hoping that sleep would claim me quickly. I did begin to drift off almost at once, but not before my tired mind asked one more question: why is it that when I saw Laurel in the moonlight, it was almost as if I could see the light through her?

I awoke the next morning feeling better. Fortunately, it was a Tuesday and I didn’t have a class until nine. Laurel had already left for class, so I had the room to myself. The entire sorority house was quiet since all of my sisters were either in class or sleeping in.

I was still a little on the tired side, unsettled by my dreams. I had dismissed Laurel’s apparent transparency as an optical illusion, brought on by the conversation in the dream. But I couldn’t write off the dream quite as easily. It had been so real. I had actually dreamed that I was an older man—a Congressman no less. Well, at least I didn’t dream small. If I had to be an older man in my dreams, I might just as well be a powerful one.

The problem was it didn’t seem like a dream. It seemed more like something that really happened that I just hadn’t thought about for a time. Lying there, I experimentally put a hand to my smooth cheek, trying to imagine what it must be like to have beard stubble. Strangely enough, I could almost envision it, as if it were something I had actually experienced. Disturbed by the sensation I had just subjected myself to, I jumped out of bed with a gasp and fled to the shower.

The warm water felt good on my body, its soft flow reassuring me that I was, indeed, a woman as it rolled gently over my breasts, teasing my nipples in a pleasurable fashion. I soaped languidly, taking perhaps an extra moment between my legs where the true proof of my sex lay passively hidden. What must it be like, I wondered, to be a man? How did they even manage to walk with all of that... equipment dangling between their legs?

I should never have asked myself that question, because unbidden, the answer emerged in my mind. I felt in my head the strange sensation of something large and potent between my legs. I understood in that moment what it felt like for a penis to harden and the demands it put on a man’s body.

“Oh God!” I screamed, rinsing myself off quickly and practically leaping out of the shower. I tried to blank out all thoughts as I dressed for class.

Myra Smithwick, one of our new pledges, was studying in the dining room while enjoying a cup of coffee. She was one of two pledges who lived in the house and my sorority little sister, so I was very happy to see her. “Wow! What are you all dressed up for today?” she asked me.

“I just felt like getting dressed up this morning,” I told her. Like most of the girls—Myra included—I normally wore jeans and a sweater to class, but men also wore jeans and sweaters. I wanted to wear something that would make me forget the odd sensations I had been experiencing. No man who I knew would go to class in a lightweight pink sweater, fall white skirt, and one-inch heels.

“Well you look great,” Myra said.

“Who looks great?” a voice called from the kitchen. I recognized it as Stacey Adams, Myra’s roommate. Stacey appeared in the doorway holding a cup of coffee. She looked at me and grinned. “Hey girl, who are you trying to impress?”

I didn’t answer her because I couldn’t. I was too shocked at seeing Stacey standing there and still being able to sense if not exactly see the coffee pot that should have been hidden behind her.

“Are you okay, April?” Myra asked me, a puzzled frown on her face.

“Oh... uh, yeah,” I finally managed, backing out of the room. “I... I... just forgot something in my room—that’s all. I’ll be right back.”

My heart was pounding as I raced back to my room. Dear God, it was true. There really were people you could see through—just like that woman, that Penny, had said in the dream. Yet as I closed the door to my room behind me, I realized Myra was not alarmed by Stacey’s appearance. Could it be that she just couldn’t see it—just as I couldn’t until then?

That was possible, but now that I could see Stacey as some sort of

apparition, how was I going to deal with her? For that matter, according to my dream girl, Penny, Stacey wasn't the only ghostly person in Ovid. Of course, ghostly might have been too strong a term. I couldn't exactly see through Stacey. Rather, it was more of a sensation of knowing what should have been hidden by her body instead of actually seeing it.

Besides, there was something to think about that was even more unsettling than Stacey's semi-transparency. Namely, the girl in my dreams might have been more than a character I had imagined in my sleep. What if she was real? That meant the drama that had played out in my mind as I slept could be a memory of an actual event.

But that just couldn't be, I told myself as I paced about my room. I had never been a man. I had always been April Lynn Stewart of Tulsa, Oklahoma. My father was general manager of an oil drilling company and my mother was a former nurse. I had two sisters, Janet and Jennie. Our dog was a basset hound named Boomer. I remembered grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles as well as friends and (blush) lovers. Yes, I remembered losing my virginity out at the lake right after I got out of high school, and I was very certain I hadn't been a man at the time.

Was it possible that my dream had somehow triggered an illusion of transparent people? Or perhaps I was still dreaming. I remembered something I had read about lucid dreaming, but this didn't seem like a dream... exactly.

No matter what, I couldn't spend the rest of my day in my room with the door shut. My sorority sisters would want to know what was wrong with me. No, I had to carry on as if everything was all right until I could figure out just what was wrong. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and prepared to face the world.

It wasn't easy, though. I walked onto campus with Stacey and Myra, trying my best to ignore Stacey's strange condition. It wasn't that hard after a little while because I realized that most of the people we passed on campus were just like Stacey. Some of them smiled and said good morning, for they were people I had known ever since I had

entered Capta College. No solid person such as me seemed to take any unusual notice of them so I did the same as best I could.

After my morning classes and a quick lunch in the Student Union cafeteria, I realized the somewhat ghostly people were not going to go away, and I was most certainly not in some incredibly lucid dream. But the events did lead me back to thinking about my initial dreams. I remembered the name my male persona had used in the dream—Conrad Williams. And he had been a member of Congress, so his biography should be available in the library. The College had a very good research section, so I decided to skip my one o'clock class and check out the congressman.

My research was all for naught. There was no Conrad Williams listed in any of the relevant publications. Oh, I did find a Conrad Williams all right. He was an English fantasy author, but no politician by that name. Apparently, my male persona was as much a fantasy as what the Englishman of the same name wrote.

Part of me was relieved. I don't know what I would have done if I had found out that a congressman by the name of Conrad Williams had disappeared about the time I started going to Capta. The fact that the man didn't exist was just further proof that all I had experienced was a dream. Of course, that didn't explain the people I could almost see through, but perhaps it was just something caused by my nightmare. Perhaps a good night's sleep would dismiss it entirely.

Or so I thought.

I drifted in and out of dreams that night, but all of them had one thing in common: I was the non-existent Conrad Williams. I was a small boy, growing up on a farm near a small Oklahoma town. I was a young man in high school, playing football. I was a male student at the University of Oklahoma. I was a young Marine officer, emulating my two older brothers and my uncle, all of whom had been Marines. I was in the desert with my patrol and could feel the impact of the missile against our chopper. I was in Congress, a respected member of my party.

But the worst dream of all was having sex with a woman. She was approaching middle age but was still very attractive. Her legs were spread but there was no enthusiasm in her that I could detect. I knew that she was my wife, and that we had lost whatever love we had once felt for each other. Still, I persisted, ramming myself into her until...

I stifled the scream I felt as I woke up. I didn't want to wake Laurel again. I groped at my breasts, relieved once more to find them still in place. But I was damp between my legs, as if ready for sex. The problem was that it didn't feel right to be wet there. I should be hard, extended...

I should be a man.

These were not dreams which had invaded my sleep. They were memories—memories of someone who shouldn't have existed but did. Or at least he existed in my mind. There was a name for my problem which I remembered from a psych course I had taken last year. It was called 'Multiple Personality Disorder.' I was going stark raving rat fuck mad.

Wait a minute. I didn't talk like that. Rat fuck? No. Yes. I don't know.

I had to seek help. I seemed to remember from my coursework that if MPD was treated early, I could be saved from watching my personality fragment still further. I'd see a doctor first thing in the morning.

First thing turned out to be after lunch. I decided I couldn't afford to miss another day of classes, and since my afternoon was free, I'd go to the Student Health Center then. It was a bad decision. All morning, I had to force the thoughts of Conrad Williams out of my mind. He was trying to take over. I could feel him lurking in my mind, reminding me of things I had no reason to have ever known in the first place. I was near tears by the time I checked in to see a doctor.

"How long have you had these problems?" the woman at the reception desk asked me. She wore scrubs like a nurse, and I could see from her nametag that that was just what she was—a PN, or Practical Nurse. Her name was Nancy Franklin, and I was relieved to see that she was taking me seriously. Her dark brown eyes held sympathy for

me, almost as if she understood my problem even better than I did. She was an attractive woman in what I guessed to be her mid-thirties, with short hair the color of her eyes and as little makeup as social convention would permit.

“The last four days,” I replied. Then I amended, “Nights really. It comes to me in dreams.”

“And you say you’re a man in those dreams?”

She was piercing me with her stare. She was one of what I had begun to think of as real people, rather than the transparent ones I had suddenly become aware of. Why was she taking such an interest in me?

“Yes. A Congressman named Conrad Williams. But I looked him up. There isn’t a Conrad Williams. Please, Ms. Franklin, I need to see a doctor right away.” I was crying now, unconcerned as to how I must look to the other students waiting in the lobby. “I... I can’t stand the thought of sleeping another night and being... him!”

She quickly wrote something on a piece of paper. “Be in this room in half an hour,” she told me.

After I looked at what she had written, I looked up at her, confused. “But this is a room in Administration. I need to see a doctor!”

She put a soft hand on the back of mine. “April, please believe me. Go to that room. The people you meet there will be able to help you more than any doctor could. Please trust me.”

There was something so sincere about what she said that I could only nod in spite of my confusion. “In half an hour?”

She nodded, her eyes shifting as if she wanted to make absolutely certain no one else could hear her. “You’ll find help there. You’ll see.”

‘Who could help me more than a doctor?’ I wondered as I made my way across campus. I shouldn’t have listened to the woman, I thought to myself. I should have insisted upon seeing a doctor. What could someone in Administration do for me—change all of my records to Conrad Williams? But I had to admit I was curious. The woman had

been very conspiratorial with me and I wanted to know why. The answers were in the Administration Building.

The room she had sent me to was a small conference room. Whoever was going to meet with me hadn't arrived yet, so I took advantage of straightening myself up a little by using the full-length mirror which the room sported. I guess it was there just to make the small room look a little larger.

I brushed back a strand of long brown hair which had been fluttering about my face as I walked across the campus facing a chilly fall breeze. My cheeks were a little red, too, and I wanted to do something about that but decided to work on my hair instead. I stood there, dressed in a plaid skirt, black turtleneck and black tights carefully smoothing my hair and wondering how in the world I could ever have imagined being a middle-aged male politician even in my nightmares. But as I looked at myself, I could almost see my large brown eyes staring out of a different face—a face that was rugged and masculine, framed in hair not too far from the color of my own if you discounted the streaks of gray.

I had never 'seen' myself in a dream. I don't imagine most people do. So why was I able to create this mental image of a man who had never existed? Why could I imagine him almost as clearly as the pretty, feminine face I knew was in the mirror.

"April Stewart?"

I jumped at the sound of the voice. I had been so captivated by my own image I hadn't heard the woman—for it was a woman's voice—enter the room. I turned tensely to face a woman who appeared to be just a few years older than I. She was black and very attractive, her dark hair short and her coffee-colored skin flawless. She wore normal business attire—a dark blue suit with her skirt conservatively at the knee. She smiled at my alarm.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." She offered a hand. "I'm Coretta McGregor. Call me Corey."

I offered my own hand, wincing a little at her strong handshake.

Although she was about my size, she had the sleek build of an athlete and the hand strength to match. “I’m sorry... I’m April Stewart.” I giggled nervously. “But I guess you already know that.”

As we were shaking hands, another person entered the room. He was a very nice looking man not much older than I. His angular face and slender body were strangely attractive as he held himself with such poise. I don’t mean he wasn’t attractive. It’s just that I usually dated more the jock types, and this guy didn’t look like a jock. His glasses were wire rims, and along with the small Van Dyke beard he had grown, provided his face with character. He looked a little familiar; I was sure I had seen him on campus before. Of course, he also looked a little like that guy on Dark Angel, so maybe that was why he looked so familiar. He offered his hand as well. “Chip Wellington,” he announced.

I looked uncomfortably at Corey. My expression told her that I had not expected an audience. “Chip is with me,” she assured me. “Once we’ve had a few moments to talk, I think you’ll understand why he’s here.”

No sooner had she finished than another person entered the room, but this one I had already met—sort of.

“I believe you know Nancy Franklin,” Corey announced as she formally introduced me to the woman who had sent me here in the first place.

I looked at the outstretched hands of the two new arrivals, unwilling to shake hands with either of them. “What’s this all about? Who are you people?” Nancy and Chip withdrew their hands exchanging amused smiles.

“Sit down, April,” Corey offered pleasantly. “We’ll explain everything shortly. Before we do, we need to hear your story. Sit down at the table and tell us what you told Nancy.”

I was hesitant at first, embarrassed to tell the entire story. I think Chip’s presence made it worse. He was a nice looking guy—the sort of guy I might even be interested in even if he wasn’t a jock. But I was

sure that after he heard my story, he wasn't going to be interested in me. Corey did an excellent job of drawing the story out of me. She was patient and even understanding. Before I knew it, I had told her everything that I had told Nancy and a lot more.

I was expounding more upon the life I recalled as Conrad Williams. Everything I said about my-his-life seemed to bring other details into focus. Soon, I replaced the word "he" with "I" as I described a life that the reference books assured me had never existed. I realized after a while that no one was talking but me. I stopped and sighed, "Look, I'm sorry. I can understand if you don't believe a word of this..."

"On the contrary," Corey replied seriously. "We believe every word of it." She looked at her two associates sitting to her right at the table. "Don't we?"

Both nodded, Chip even saying quietly, "Absolutely."

My heart skipped a beat. "Does that mean you can help me get rid of this... this delusion?"

"Oh it's not a delusion," Corey laughed. "I have no doubt that you really were Conrad Williams, a member of Congress."

"But that's not possible," I protested. "I know who I am."

Corey leaned forward. "You've told us a story. Now let me tell you one. A few years ago, some very powerful beings created a town out of nothing. They called it Ovid—after the Roman poet. For at least ten years, they've been gathering up anyone who strayed too close to them and turning them into residents of their town. You just got caught up in their net. Then you were sent to see The Judge you mentioned and the next thing you knew, you were April Lynn Stewart of Tulsa, Oklahoma, coming to Ovid to attend college. Your friends were changed, too, into new people."

"But no one has that kind of power," I argued. "What are you saying—they're space aliens?"

"More fantastic than that," Chip broke in. "They're gods."

"Gods?"

“Yes, gods,” Corey confirmed. “Remember when you were a boy, reading all those Roman myths about Jupiter and Juno and Mars and Apollo?”

“But those are just stories.”

“Some of them are,” Corey admitted, “for these gods aren’t always the way we read about them. But maybe they’ve changed over the centuries, or maybe the people who chronicled them got it wrong. Whatever the case, this town is run by Roman gods who have changed you to suit their own purposes and will never let you go.”

I jumped up. “You people are just plain crazy!” I started to leave but stopped when Chip called out to me.

“You know, I really admired that game you played against Nebraska. Four touchdowns in the first half really broke their backs. If you hadn’t pulled that hamstring, you might have scored four more in the second half.”

I turned from the door and stared at him. “I didn’t say anything about playing football. How do you know about that game?”

“Because I was there,” Chip replied, standing to look me straight in the eye. “My dad took me to see it. I was just a little guy then, and I sure didn’t look like I do now, but I made up my mind watching that game and watching you that I was going to be just as good a football player as you were.”

“And were you?” I asked quietly, feeling in that moment a strange kinship with this young man who shouldn’t have even been born the day of that Nebraska-Oklahoma game so many years ago.

He grinned. “Better. I was starting wide receiver for the Sooners for all four years and played ten years in the pros for Kansas City before I got sidelined.” He put out his hand again to me. “It’s really a pleasure to finally meet you again.”

This time, I slowly took his hand. It was warm and comforting somehow. He applied pressure to his shake as if he were shaking with a man but not enough to hurt my smaller hand. “Should I remember

you?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "No. I came to Ovid before you did. No one outside remembers Flip Washington. You wouldn't either. The funny thing is, we actually met. You came into the locker room before a Texas game a few years back. You even shook my hand and wished me well."

"I remember being there," I confirmed. "But I don't remember you."

He grinned. "You wouldn't."

Slowly, I sat back down at the table, noting the amused expressions from my three new acquaintances. I began to realize that I needed now more than ever to listen to what they had to say. It was one thing when I remembered being someone who couldn't have possibly existed outside my own mind. It was another thing when I realized that at least one of these people knew that Conrad Williams was more than the delusional ramblings of a young coed who had apparently flipped out.

"Exactly who are you people?" I asked slowly and softly.

Nancy snorted, "That's a good question!" She settled down when Corey gave her a stern glance. It was Corey who continued, "We're The Judge's mistakes."

It took her fifteen minutes to tell me what she knew of the transformation process. Apparently, less than half of those transformed remembered their previous lives. The rest were like I—like we had been. Most of those who lost their memories never recovered, but a few—a very few—regained their recollections of a previous life.

"But why us?" I asked.

Corey shrugged. "The common thread appears to be some sort of injury to the brain suffered in our previous lives. Nancy had a large brain tumor which cut off parts of the brain. Chip had a stroke. As for me, I had been injured and had brain damage."

"And I had a metal plate in my head from a war injury," I cut in.

Corey nodded. "So you see the pattern."

"The human brain is a marvellous device," Nancy explained, sounding much like a doctor. I found out later she had been one in her previous life. "It stores information in multiple places so that if one storehouse of data is destroyed, the duplicate knowledge stored elsewhere is transmitted to wherever it needs to be."

"Our gods didn't seem to realize this," Corey continued. "They appear to be under the assumption that you either remember your previous life as all of their pets do or you forget your previous existence in which case you're of no further interest to them."

"But that's actually an advantage to us," Chip explained. "Apparently some of the rules are programmed into us when we're transformed."

"Rules?" I think I was becoming even more confused.

"Yeah," Chip nodded with a grin. "You see, if we had maintained our memories when we were first changed, we wouldn't be having this conversation. People who remember..."

"We call them Rems," Nancy interjected.

Chip nodded. "Right—the Rems. They can't talk about the gods or even mention them by name in this context."

"We believe the Rems also are given something when they are changed that allows them to accept their transformation without going totally bug shit," Nancy added.

"Sort of like divine Prozac," Chip clarified.

"Oh this is just too much for me," I laughed nervously. "You're trying to tell me that I'm not really April Stewart but instead some congressman no one has ever heard of?"

"Oh you're April Stewart all right," Corey assured me. "In case you weren't listening to everything we've told you, Conrad Williams was completely removed from reality and April Stewart was put in his place. You're going to be a girl until we can force the gods to change us back."

My eyes narrowed. "And just how are four mentally-damaged victims going to do that?" I could have added, "even if we wanted to change back." After all, I wasn't exactly interested in becoming a middle-aged man again, assuming what they had told me was true. I might have two sets of memories, but the strongest set still told me I was April Stewart. Conrad Williams was just a hotshot politician with delusions of being Emperor of the Known Universe as far as I could tell. I didn't think I had a lot in common with him.

"There are considerably more than four of us," Corey informed me. "Are you familiar with the concept of the revolutionary cell?"

"Cell?" Suddenly the information on cells was in my mind. I remembered an intelligence expert briefing us in Congress on the concept. It was funny, but the memory hadn't been there a moment ago. Uncomfortably, I realized that more and more stimuli could trigger memories of a life I didn't want to know anything about. "Cells are small political units, usually with half a dozen or fewer members. They're organized so that if one unit is brought down by the authorities, no one knows the members of the other cells, so the entire revolution can't be stopped by one mistake."

Corey nodded. "That's exactly right. And just like revolutionaries for decades, that's how we're organized in Ovid."

I know my mouth had to be hanging open. "You're telling me that there are many of these cells here in Ovid?"

"Several dozen," Corey confirmed with a smug smile. "The gods don't suspect us. They think they have tight security in this town. You see, they think only the Rems have their memories, and they've made it so none of them can even speak the names of the gods except as mythological figures. In fact, three of them in a group can't even discuss their situation even if they don't name the gods."

"Look," I said slowly, "I don't want to get involved in anything crazy like a revolution. I just want to make these dreams about another life go away. I don't want to be Conrad Williams or any other man."

"You say that now," Corey countered, "but soon your male memories

will be as strong as your female ones. What happens then? What happens when you can't have a boyfriend because it seems like a gay relationship?"

I saw Nancy wince at that.

"What happens when you realize you're stuck here being a simple little coed when you could have been one of the most powerful men in the land? Don't bother to deny it, April—it will happen. It's happened to all of us. Nancy was a well-respected surgeon. Chip played professional football. I was a well-to-do male business executive. Now look at us. Look at you."

"What's wrong with me?" I asked defiantly.

"Consider our offer," Corey pressed. "We're asking you to join us—help us escape from here with our old lives again. The Judge and his henchmen claim they rescued us from death. We don't believe it. They just stole our lives for their own amusement. Help us get back at them."

Corey was a persuasive speaker, and I felt as if she was speaking right from the heart. It wouldn't be easy to turn her down. Besides, I thought, it appeared as if this was the only group I could explain my problem to who wouldn't laugh at me or drag me before The Judge. "I'll think about it," I replied quietly.

Chip rose. "Come on, April, I'll walk you back to your sorority."

I nodded, grateful for the company. I really didn't want to be alone.

"Think about it, April," Corey called out as we left.

"I will," I promised, meaning it.

In fact, I thought about it most of the way back to my sorority house. Chip was a gentleman. He tried at first to engage me in conversation but backed away when he correctly deduced that I was in a pensive mood and unwilling to talk. The shame of it was I found him very attractive. If it wasn't for the weird situation I found myself in, I would probably have been sizing Chip up as my next boyfriend.

I wondered why I found him so attractive. He wasn't my type. Were some of Conrad's thoughts and attitudes bleeding over into my mind? If so, why didn't I think, as Corey had suggested, that being attracted to boys was gay? There was nothing in my memories to indicate that Conrad Williams had been gay. Maybe Conrad's thoughts were just making me consider other aspects of guys like Chip which would make him desirable even if he wasn't a jock.

I tried to keep my mind off Chip's looks and concentrate on what Corey had told me. I was terribly curious as to why a bunch of Roman gods would take the time and effort to build a phony town like Ovid and populate it with unsuspecting humans. But I was more than curious; I was livid as well. What right did they have to take me out of my life and put me in this one? Not that I wanted my old life back exactly. It was still like a bad dream to me rather than an actual life, but it was the principle of the thing. They had no right to do this to me!

"We're here."

"What?" I asked stupidly.

Chip raised an amused eyebrow. "This is your sorority house, isn't it?"

"Uh... yes," I mumbled. "Sorry, I was just thinking."

He nodded. "I know. It's a lot to think about."

"But is it real?" I asked him, hoping he'd tell me it was all just a big joke.

"Everything Corey told you is real," he confirmed.

"So what does she—what do all of you—expect to get out of this?" I demanded. "If these beings are really gods, how can you hope to defeat them?"

Chip shook his head. "You don't understand, April. This is all too new for you. We don't really want to defeat them. We just want them to quit playing with our lives. Some, like Corey and Nancy want to go back to their old lives—they want to be men again."

"And you—what do you want?" I asked him. "You want to go back to

your old life, too?”

He shook his head. “Actually no. Maybe someday I’ll tell you why. Let’s just say for now that I don’t like somebody trying to run my life for me—even if that somebody is a god.”

I smiled. I couldn’t help myself. I liked Chip’s attitude. Why couldn’t I have met him before I had started dating that ass Paul last spring?

“Well...” he shrugged as if uncertain as to what to do next.

I put my hand on his arm. “Thanks for walking me home, Chip.”

“Any time.” He turned away, then turned back to face me. “April, if you need anything, give me a call. Here’s my number.” He hastily wrote a phone number on the back of a business card for Rusty’s Burger Barn.

Reluctantly, I took the card. As nice as Chip was—not to mention good-looking—I wasn’t sure I wanted to get tied up with him and his friends. “Okay,” I replied blandly, rewarding him with my least-dazzling smile. It was enough for him, though. He smiled back—a toothy, boyish smile—and turned away once more.

“Who’s your new boyfriend?” one of the girls called out as I entered the sorority house to find half a dozen girls who had apparently just witnessed my parting moments with Chip.

“I know who he is!” one of the other girls called out. “He’s Chip Wellington.”

“You know Chip?” I asked with surprise.

The girl who had spoken up was Mary Phillips, one of the brightest girls in the house—and one of the transparent people. She grinned. “I wouldn’t be much of a physics major if I didn’t know the studliest TA in the whole department, would I?”

“Uh... no, I suppose not,” I managed.

“He’s cute,” Myra volunteered. One of the other pledges nodded in enthusiastic agreement.

“Thanks,” I replied. I thought of telling them that Chip wasn’t my boyfriend, but maybe it was safer for the moment to let them think so. I still hadn’t made up my mind whether or not I was going to have anything to do with Corey’s cell, but if I did, it would allow me to meet with Chip without drawing any suspicion.

That wasn’t the only reason Chip would be a convenience for me if everyone thought him to be my boyfriend. Since Paul had unceremoniously dumped me, a few of his jock friends had been sniffing around, and I have to admit I had shown some interest. As I said, I always seemed to have a thing for jocks. The problem was that ‘thing’ seemed to be abating. Oh, don’t get me wrong. I still found them to be absolutely hunky. It’s just that I didn’t want any serious entanglements until I had sorted things out in my mind.

The rest of the evening went by fairly normally. I studied and worked on a paper. One of the problems with being an English major was the never-ending succession of papers I had to write. I managed to immerse myself in normal activities, and by bedtime I had nearly forgotten about Conrad Williams and all the Roman gods. Once in bed, my relief turned out to be short-lived, however.

I was in a war.

Oh, I knew it was all a dream, but it was vivid beyond any dream I had ever experienced before. I was a man again, dressed in desert camouflage. I could feel the sweat on my face dripping from the uncomfortable beard stubble. It was ungodly hot—even hotter when I faced toward the sun. The air was sickeningly moist, in spite of the dry sand all around my men and me.

“Captain, HQ wants us to move forward!” That was from one of my men. Somehow, I knew his name was Sergeant Forrester.

Before I could answer him, there was a shrill whistle overhead followed by an explosion a couple of hundred yards behind us.

“Damn it, don’t they know we’re already in artillery range?” I yelled back at him over the noise of the explosion.

“They’re taking care of that right now sir!”

As if on cue, two F-14s streaked over us at low altitude. I never got to answer the sergeant. The bright desert sun was suddenly replaced by the cool darkness of my room. The stifling heat of camos worn for two straight days was replaced by the cool fabric of my nightgown. Reflexively, I put my hand to my face relieved to feel smooth, soft skin on my chin.

I looked over at the clock. It was three in the morning—0300 Military Time. How were my men doing? Then I remembered that they all did fine. The F-14s took out the artillery for us. We moved forward, hitching up with another unit just like HQ wanted.

No...

They were there—all of my memories. Or perhaps I should say all of Conrad Williams’ memories. But that was saying the same thing, wasn’t it? After all, I was Conrad Williams.

God, what had happened to me? I had been trapped for two years in the body of a girl. I had worn skirts and makeup. I had joined a sorority. I had made love to... to...

Those bastards! Gods? They weren’t gods; they were devils. They had no right to do this to me, to take away my life and replace it with this simpering, giggling, infantile girl!

Still fuming, I got up and rushed over to my desk. Fumbling about in the dark, I managed to find the card Chip had given me. I was mindful of the fact that it was the middle of the night, but some things just could not wait. I slipped out of the room and found the house phone furthest from my sleeping ‘sisters.’

“Hum-oh,” a sleepy male voice mumbled in a comical attempt to say hello.

“I need to talk with you, Chip.”

“April?”

Of course it’s April, I said to myself. What other girl would call him up

at three in the morning?

“We need to talk, Chip—in person.” I certainly didn’t want anyone in the house hearing what I had to say.

“Will breakfast do?”

I thought about my schedule. I had a class at nine I couldn’t afford to cut but was free until then. “Where do you want to meet?”

“How about Nellie’s?”

Ugh! Nellie’s Grill wasn’t exactly the sort of place coeds from Capta College went for breakfast. But from my memories, it was the sort of place Conrad Williams might show up for a photo op when he was trying to be just one of the boys. “All right. Seven thirty?”

“See you then.”

Conrad Williams might have enjoyed Nellie’s but I didn’t. By morning, I was probably more April than Conrad once again. I was wearing jeans, a sweater and a leather jacket against the morning chill when I entered Nellie’s, but the looks I was getting from the almost exclusively male patrons made me wonder if I had been magically dressed in a bikini. All conversation stopped except for the middle-aged transparent waitress who was yelling out an order to an unseen cook in back.

I looked around, relieved as I spotted Chip in a booth all the way in back. I rushed to join him, trying unsuccessfully to walk without swivelling my hips. God, haven’t men got anything better to do than watch girls walking?

“You sounded pretty shook up last night,” Chip remarked as he poured a cup of coffee for me. I was not a big coffee fan. No, that’s not right. April Stewart was not a big coffee fan. Conrad Williams was. I gratefully accepted the coffee, taking a sip of it black just the way Conrad liked it. The bitter taste was not pleasant.

“I’m sorry about that,” I said as I added two packets of sugar to the

cup—the only way April Stewart could stand the stuff. I looked him in the eye. “Look, I want to join you.”

Chip shifted back in his seat and looked at me critically. “What changed your mind?”

I told him about the dream and how I now had all of Conrad Williams’ memories banging around in my head.

His eyes narrowed. “So now you want to be Conrad Williams again?”

I hesitated. Did I? I answered slowly, “I’m not sure, but I have to do something. I can’t have two people’s memories all the time. Look at me—I can’t even drink a cup of coffee without deciding if it’s April Stewart or Conrad Williams in control.”

He nodded with understanding. “Nancy has the same problem. Corey probably does, too.”

“But that means you don’t?” I asked, suddenly curious about Chip.

His reply was delayed by the appearance of the waitress. We both ordered—a full Southern-style breakfast for Chip and a poached egg on toast and orange juice for me. Then Chip told me, “I guess it’s easier for me. At least I’m still the same sex.”

“But not the same race, I’ll bet.”

He looked at me in surprise.

I laughed, “It wasn’t too hard to figure out. Flip Washington is a rather unusual name for a white guy.”

He grinned back. “Yeah, I guess so. To make it worse, my real name was Abdul Mohammed Washington. My parents were into that Islamic stuff.”

“But not you,” I prompted.

He shook his head. “No, I was raised by an aunt—a Baptist aunt—after my parents died. I was only five when they were killed in a car crash. My aunt thought I reminded her of the old comedian, Flip Wilson. The name sort of stuck.”

“So I assume you want to get back to your old life.”

He shook his head. “No way. I’m happy here. Now don’t start thinking it’s because I’m white now instead of black. I was fine being black. It’s just here I’m free to be who I was meant to be. You see, April, I was your poster boy for ‘black dude grows up in the ghetto and works his way out by becoming a successful athlete’ story. And sure, I was big and looked plenty mean. My aunt didn’t have much money—certainly not enough to send me to college. So I had to depend on an athletic scholarship to go to college.

“Once I got to Oklahoma, the coaches told me that I should major in something easy to keep me eligible for football. I was a pretty good student in high school, but they seemed to think I was nothing but a big dumb jock. After a while, it was as if I was majoring in football. When I got out of school with a degree in Recreational Studies, about the only thing I was qualified to do was play football.”

“At least you were lucky enough to play in the NFL,” I pointed out. I should know. The game Chip had mentioned where I scored big against Nebraska had ended my chances at an NFL career. My knee had been repairable—enough so to get me into the military. But NFL scouts were sure I’d never be able to make it in the pros. After a few months in the Marines grimacing every time strenuous activity caused my knee to hurt, I was convinced they were right.

“I know, but here I can do what I really want to do.”

“Teach physics?”

“How did you know that?” he asked suspiciously just as our breakfasts came.

“Easy,” I grinned. “One of the girls in my sorority called you the studliest TA in the Physics Department.”

Chip blushed shyly. He really was studly, I thought. I quickly suppressed that thought. Conrad didn’t like the idea of a man being studly.

Conversation halted again as the waitress put our plates in front of us.

The orange juice looked watery and the poached egg looked like something out of the Third World. It was better than Chip's plate though. How he could eat that greasy junk was beyond me. I think even the Conrad side of me was a little disgusted.

"Why physics?" I asked while trying to determine if my poached egg was edible.

"Why not physics?" he returned as he cut up a thick slab of ham into bite-sized chunks. "You think maybe a poor black guy from the ghetto can't handle physics?"

He said it as a joke, but now it was my turn to blush. "No, of course not. I guess I mean if you don't want your old life back, why are you helping Corey when you ought to be uncovering the Secrets of the Universe?"

"But that's exactly what I'm doing," he countered. "Think about it. These gods have created a town out of nowhere and changed humans to populate it. Talk about your Secrets of the Universe! They already know them—or at least some of them. Corey and Nancy and all the other revolutionary cells can do whatever they please. I just want to know more about our jailers and how they do it. I'm content to stay here for the rest of my life if I can learn even a part of their secrets."

I nodded in understanding. I wasn't sure if I wanted to live my life as April Stewart or more like Conrad Williams, but I, too, wanted to know why the gods had done this to us. I wasn't about to sit back and do nothing about it. As a member of Congress, I had always felt I had a mission to do what was best for America. It was too much of a stretch to think that ancient gods screwing around with American citizens was good for America. I might not be the powerful person I had once been, but I'd do what I could.

"So how do I join?" I asked flippantly. "Do I sign my name in blood or take a secret oath?"

"If you want," Chip laughed as he sopped a piece of toast in a pool of disgusting grits. "But seriously, just go see Corey. She works over at the college in Purchasing. Just tell her you're in and she'll find

something for you to do.”

“Something to do?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Don’t worry; it won’t be anything dangerous. Mostly, we just look things up for her—you know, stuff from the library or something in the local newspapers. She says other cells handle some of the dangerous tasks. We just gather information.”

That suited me fine. Information was what I wanted. I had no desire to storm the City Hall and drag The Judge out of his chambers while others fired the building. Besides, even if some of the other cells had such violent revolutionary plans, what good would they do against the power of gods? Before they were able to fire the building, they’d probably all be changed into weasels or something. Gathering information seemed to be a no-risk proposition. Of course, at the time I had no idea what that might entail.

Chip chivalrously paid for my breakfast and walked me past the ogling male clientele to my car. “Maybe I ought to go with you to see Corey,” he suggested.

“I’ve got class now,” I told him, opening the door to my little Ford Focus. “I’ll have to see her later.” Impulsively, I leaned over and gave him a kiss on his cheek. Conrad didn’t like that but for April it felt sort of nice. “Thanks for your help, Chip.”

“Hey, all I did was talk to you.”

I smiled. “And that’s just what I needed.”

I felt almost normal in my classes. Losing myself in the lectures, I felt almost like my old self—or maybe I should say like my new old self or my April self. Even the transparent people didn’t bother me much. After a quick lunch at the Student Union with a couple of my sorority sisters and an early afternoon class, I was almost ready to forget the whole thing, blow Corey off, and live out my life as April.

But then I realized it would soon be another night—a night with dreams of a previous life most likely. If they continued, the thoughts and attitudes of Conrad Williams might become stronger in my waking

psyche. If they were, I'd slowly either go mad or lose my ability to function as a normal woman. Already Conrad's thoughts were encroaching on April's life in ways that might eventually be disastrous. If I could figure out what was happening in Ovid, I might have a chance of finding out how to control my two selves.

I walked into Corey's office just as she was gathering up her belongings to leave for the day. Actually, I had planned it that way. I hadn't realized that her job in Purchasing actually entailed running the department for the college, giving her a private office. She gave me a warm smile as I entered. "April! How nice to see you."

"I've been thinking about what you told me," I said without any preamble. "I want to help."

I went on to explain to her my reasons for helping her group, and she seemed to accept them at face value. "So you don't want to be male again?" she asked when I had finished.

"I don't remember saying that," I told her from my seat across the desk from her. I was having trouble verbalizing exactly what I did want. I would have thought Corey would have no trouble understanding that. She had been a businessman after all. She knew what it was like to have memories of being both a man and a woman just as I did. Apparently she had learned to reconcile her two genders better.

"But you did say you were having trouble dealing with both sets of memories," she reminded me. "You know April Stewart is an artificial creation. And from what you've told me, Conrad Williams was a powerful man. Surely you want to go back to that life."

I didn't respond. The fact of the matter was I had been thinking about that very thing all day. Why was I so reluctant to return to my former life? Corey was right. I knew my memories of growing up as a girl were as false as the transparent people walking the streets of Ovid. Wouldn't it be better—cleaner really—to find a way to return to the life of an important figure—a member of Congress no less?

But could I do that? I remembered the plane trouble. I felt in my heart that we would have surely crashed and died without the intervention of

The Judge and his cronies. Then there would be no glorious future for me. I had no idea what had happened to my staff, but obviously The Judge had changed them as well. Maybe like me, they had not remembered who they had been before. Would it be fair to yank them out of their new lives and return them to lives they didn't even remember? Was that even possible?

But on the other hand, if The Judge could change reality so completely, why couldn't he have rescued us from the plane crash? Just think—I could be returned to that moment. Dusty could find a way to pull the plane up again. We'd go on to Muskogee and then on to Tulsa. The next day, I'd be reunited with my wife in Oklahoma City in plenty of time to make the big rally my supporters had planned for me there. Then it would be on to victory in the primary. Then I'd be governor. Then things would really start rolling...

Yes, I thought, things would be rolling all right. I'd be a man again, but a middle-aged one. I'd be saddled with an unhappy marriage that existed only to satisfy the political ambitions of my wife and me. Life as April Stewart was almost a vacation compared to the life I had been a part of before. I was young and attractive, and I had been female long enough for it to seem perfectly natural.

Of course, April Stewart was not exactly perfect, I thought as I tried to see her from the perspective of Conrad Williams. She was vain and shallow in many ways. While an attractive brunette, she acted at times more like a blonde Valley Girl, flirting hopelessly with boys and even going to bed with ones she found attractive enough to date regularly. Her grades were mediocre, choosing to spend most of her time in social activities. In some ways, she was a poor little rich girl—the pampered youngest child of a Tulsa businessman who had been able to give his only daughter a nice car, pretty clothes, and an education which would allow her to meet plenty of eligible and intelligent guys, one of whom would probably marry her and keep her as her parents had before.

My God, I realized, there was the problem. After I left Corey's office, I walked back to the sorority house realizing that I didn't mind being

April Stewart. I just didn't want to be the April Stewart I had been for the last two years. I wanted to be... another April Stewart—one who could make a difference just as Conrad Williams had wanted to.

Myra Smithwick and a couple of other girls were studying in the dining room when I got back to the house. She looked up from her book and smiled wickedly. "Your new boyfriend just called."

"What boyfriend?" I asked. I had been so deep in thought I had forgotten that they all thought of Chip as my boyfriend. "Oh, you mean Chip. He's not my boyfriend. He's just... a friend who's a boy."

Myra and the other girls broke into a fit of uncontrollable giggles. "And you're not his girlfriend," one of them mocked in a singsong voice. "You're just his friend who's a girl."

There was more laughter at that and I could feel my face flush. There was no sense in trying to make them understand, I realized as I rolled my eyes and ran up the stairs to my room hoping that Laurel wasn't back from classes yet. I wanted to use our phone in privacy.

Chip answered on the first ring. "What's up?" I asked.

I could almost sense him shrugging. "Nothing much. I just thought I'd see if you talked to Corey today."

"Yeah, I did." I had thought he might be calling me up with an assignment already. I told him as much.

"No," he laughed. "Corey doesn't demand much of our time. Weeks go by without anything from her. She says she uses that time to coordinate with other cells. I just called to see if you wanted to go to a movie with me tonight."

"A date?" I didn't mean to yell that into the phone, but Chip caught me by surprise.

"Well... yes."

It wasn't as if I had never had a date before. I had dated lots of guys, and the old April Stewart would have said yes in a heartbeat—especially to a guy as good looking as Chip. But I had Conrad

Williams to worry about now, and the Conrad part of me nearly puked at the idea of dating another... I mean a guy.

He sensed my reluctance when I didn't say anything, so he pressed on, "Look, April, you and I may have to work together on projects. It wouldn't hurt for us to get to know each other better. Besides, your sorority sisters will just think I'm the guy you've started dating."

"Oh? Did you ask Nancy out when you two first met?"

"I might have if she hadn't been married with two kids."

I hadn't realized Nancy had a family. Talk about a rude awakening! That meant she woke up one day to find not only that her manhood was gone but that she had family responsibilities as well. No wonder Nancy acted a little flaky. If I had been in her shoes, I would have been an absolute basket case. Of course come to think of it, I was something of a basket case right now.

"Chip," I said as gently as I could, "I don't think it would be a good idea. I really need to study..."

He was silent for a moment. I cringed a little, the Conrad part of me remembering similar rejections when I was a young man. "Maybe this weekend?" he asked quietly.

The April side of me knew he wasn't going to give up easily. I was too confused though to start dating someone. It wasn't just the Conrad side of me. My breakup with Paul had hurt me deeply and I needed some time to think. But on the other hand, I was an attractive girl. Other boys were already finding out about the breakup with Paul. They'd start asking me out as well. And my sorority sisters would want to know why I had stopped dating altogether. I couldn't very well tell any of them what had happened, could I?

Maybe dating Chip wouldn't be such a bad idea. It would keep other boys and my sorority sisters from pestering me. And since Chip knew my situation, I could keep him at bay. Besides, I thought wickedly enough to cause the Conrad in me to wince, Chip was kind of cute.

"Okay."

“Okay?”

“Yeah, we can do something together this weekend.”

I don’t think winning the lottery would have made Chip feel any better. I had to smile in spite of myself as he enthusiastically made plans to take me to dinner and a movie on Friday night. Nothing fancy, you understand, but a real live date. I got the distinct impression Chip didn’t get out much.

Laurel had walked into the room as I was finishing up with Chip. I hadn’t realized she had been discretely listening to my side of the conversation. When I hung up, she teased, “What’s this? April Stewart actually turned down a date on a school night to study?”

“And what’s wrong with that?” I wanted to know.

Laurel grinned. “It’s just unusual for you to put classes over your social life.”

I just shrugged. She was right, I realized. April Stewart had never been much of a dedicated student. I was majoring in English with the idea of someday becoming an English teacher. It wasn’t what I really wanted, though. I—or rather April—had come to college to meet eligible guys, one of whom would marry me and support me in the good old-fashioned way. I was my mother’s daughter, and that’s what she had done.

All of a sudden, that didn’t seem like much of a goal. If I was going to be April Stewart for the rest of my life, the part of me that had been someone else had more ambition than that. Conrad Williams had been a powerful man with aspirations to become president. Was April Stewart going to just sit back and let some guy sweep her off her feet and run her life for her? Not any more she wasn’t.

I actually did what I told Chip I was going to do that night; I studied. April’s notes were a mess, and I was embarrassed to see little flowers and clouds drawn in the margin of sparse notes. I’d have to start paying more attention in class. Otherwise, I would be forced to adopt Plan B and let some guy sweep me off my feet because I’d never be

much of an English teacher.

One course I had the next day was political science. Science... ha! Politics wasn't a science; it was an art. I don't know which disgusted me more as I read the assignment for the next day's class—the simplicity of the text or the unrealistic, totally idealistic message it conveyed. My years in Congress had taught me that the people who went into the field with the idealistic views expressed in the text were reduced to dog meat in a few weeks. Politics was rough and tumble. A politician had to be able to stand up in front of a business audience and tell them why they should support him or her and then walk right across the street and tell an audience of labor union members why he or she deserved their support when both audiences were on opposite sides of many of the issues.

Thoughts like that were still rolling around in my head when I sat down for Professor Wheeler's political science lecture the next morning. I had always liked Professor Wheeler although I was struggling by with a C in his course. He was real and not one of the transparent people who made up most of the students in the class. With his white hair and neatly-trimmed beard, he seemed more like a professor out of another era. Yet he was sharp and witty and his lectures were punctuated with references to political campaigns he had participated in. Perhaps he was a Rem who had actually been in on those campaigns, or perhaps he had the implanted memories the rest of us were given. Whichever the case, his stories smacked of real politics and even involved men I had known in my days as a congressman.

"Ms. Stewart!"

I was about to be called upon. Professor Wheeler had a nasty habit of calling upon some of the slower students to feed him wrong answers so he could set them—and the entire class—straight. It also meant we all had to pay attention—especially those of us whose performance in his class was mediocre.

"Yes?"

"Who can become President of the United States?"

I knew what he meant. He was looking for the age and citizenship requirements stated in the text. I could have answered them of course, but with my newfound knowledge, I decided to have a little fun with him.

“A little over a hundred and fifty men and women,” I replied.

The answer was so odd that Professor Wheeler looked almost at a loss of what to say. The silence was laced with an occasional snicker. A few students had decided that April was being a ditz today.

“Would you explain that remark, Ms. Stewart?” he asked at last.

I laced my fingers and looked up at him from my second row seat, much as a small schoolgirl might do. “The actual requirement according to Article II of the Constitution is that the candidate be at least thirty-five years of age, a natural born citizen of the United States, and a resident of the United States for at least fourteen years. It also covers those who were not natural born but were citizens of the United States at the time of the adoption of the Constitution, but I don’t think there are any of them left around.”

He actually looked a little stricken. Lots of people could recite the age and “natural born” rule but not the others. “But a moment ago you said...”

“I know what I said,” I replied. “I was just being pragmatic. Actually, while a large number of Americans are eligible to become president, only a few actually can become president—which was the way you phrased the question.”

He folded his arms, his composure returning. There was actually a little look of satisfaction on his face. He sensed he was in for an interesting discussion. “Then perhaps you had better explain your statement.”

“While the rules of eligibility for the presidency are fairly broad, no one has been elected to the job in almost half a century without having been either Vice President, US Senator or governor of one of the states. The last exception was Eisenhower. Popular winning generals

like Eisenhower still have a shot although it isn't as good a path as it once was."

"But what about Gerald Ford?" the professor asked. "He was a member of the House of Representatives."

"Yes," I agreed, "and he was appointed and not elected. Besides, when he became president, he had already been appointed vice president. When he stood for election, he was defeated by Jimmy Carter—a governor by the way. And when you think about it, being a governor is actually the best way. Four of our last five presidents have been governors or former governors. The last president elected directly from the Senate was John Kennedy in 1960."

Professor Wheeler's eyes were actually twinkling now. "And why do you think the Senate is falling behind?"

I shrugged. "Senators have to vote on issues. Their vote becomes a matter of public record. With all the divisive issues facing the nation these days, a US Senator, no matter how personally popular he might be, can have his views brought into question by reviewing his voting record. Governors don't vote, so their view can be skewed to fit their audiences better. They are also viewed as executives, just as the President of the United States is viewed as an executive. And since they have no foreign policy experience, they are mostly immune from criticism there as well—except for the comment that they obviously lack such experience. Still, it's usually better to lack the experience than to be judged on their voting record."

"That would seem to be a very jaundiced viewpoint," Professor Wheeler noted. Then he smiled. "It is also a very cogent argument."

I could almost hear the gasps from my fellow students.

"You see don't you that what she is saying is the reality of politics today?" he went on, addressing the class and turning away from me.

"But doesn't that mean our system doesn't work?" a boy toward the back of the room asked.

"On the contrary," Professor Wheeler returned. "It means it's working

just fine. The electorate has determined that this process of choosing a chief executive from the pool of individuals with the most meaningful experience works very well. Oh, a senator or even a congressman might know more about international relations or the military and how things work on a national scale, but they don't always know how to manage through staffs and departments as effectively as a governor would."

He turned back to me. "An excellent analysis, Ms. Stewart." And with that, he turned back to his lecture. Needless to say, I felt as proud as I had felt in a long, long time. I could almost feel the awed stares of my classmates. Even the political science majors seemed begrudgingly impressed.

Professor Wheeler went on with his lecture, and I listened intently. My April memories were of a class that I was only taking to meet a social studies requirement, but I now found it to be exciting, in spite of the naïve and stupid questions some of the students asked. The naïve questions came from the better students whose sense of idealism would never have worked in the real political world. The stupid questions came from the lesser students who seemed to have little or no idea of how the American political system worked. If required to take the citizenship test foreigners were given before being granted citizenship, they would probably have flunked. I thought with a momentary pang of chagrin that the old April Stewart would probably have failed with them.

As I gathered up my notes after class, Professor Wheeler called out, "Ms. Stewart, could you stay a moment please?"

Uh-oh, I thought. I had tipped my hand inadvertently. I shouldn't have called attention to myself. My argument had been so out of character for April Stewart that the professor sensed something was wrong. In the future, I'd have to be more subtle.

"Ms. Stewart," he began once everyone had left the two of us standing and facing each other, "I was intrigued with your argument. It was the sort of discussion I would expect to have with a graduate student—not a young lady who has previously shown little interest in my subject."

“Oh... well...” I stammered nervously, “I guess I... Well, I guess I just suddenly developed an interest in the subject.”

His eyes narrowed and I seriously wondered if he was going to turn me in to The Judge for further investigation. Then, he allowed himself a small smile, not noticing that I had visibly relaxed at the sight of it.

“Well, I suppose it does happen occasionally,” he admitted. “Usually, a student comes into the class prepared to like or dislike the subject and seldom changes his or her mind. Most are just taking the course to meet a requirement and those who are majoring in the subject usually plan to go into law or economics at the graduate level. What is your major, Ms. Stewart?”

“English,” I replied, a little embarrassed to admit it. April, of course, was an English major. Conrad thought it was a worthless subject to specialize in.

“English,” he repeated. “And yet you have a grasp of the political equation that even some members of Congress refuse to accept.”

Wasn’t that the truth? I had known members of Congress who flattered and deluded themselves into thinking that they had a shot at the presidency in spite of the fact that they represented backwater districts or small states without influence. At least I had had sense enough to switch to the governorship before trying to thrust myself upon the national scene.

“Thank you, Professor Wheeler,” I managed to reply.

“Ms. Stewart, what you major in is entirely up to you,” he went on. “But I must say that I suspect you would do very well as a political science major. Have you ever considered it?”

Considered changing majors? I had just found out that I had changed sex. That was enough change to think about for the moment. I shook my head. “No sir.”

He seemed just a little disappointed. “Well, should you ever decide to consider it, please let me know. And I hope you will continue to bring up points such as the ones you had today.” He gave me a fatherly

smile.

I returned it and said, "I'd be happy to."

It was with no small relief that I left the classroom. Thank God he hadn't gotten too suspicious. I'd have to be more careful in the future. April Stewart was known on campus as a girl who was something of an underachiever when it came to schoolwork and a bit of an overachiever when it came to men. I'd have to be subtle about how I handled both. School wouldn't be a problem. I had no intention of being a mediocre student just because I had been in the past. April had always had the ability and chosen not to develop it. Conrad, on the other hand, was ambitious and bright. If I had chosen to change my major as Professor Wheeler encouraged, I'd have no problems being an A student. But no matter what I majored in, I'd have to let my tests and papers enhance my reputation for me. Acting too much out of character in class could be dangerous.

As for the over-achievement with men, that presented a bigger problem. As April, I had never been promiscuous, but if I really, really cared for a boy, I would go to bed with him. Sex was a mutual expression of love to me, and the act was more than a little enjoyable. The problem was that with Conrad's memories available to me now, I realized that I had been a little naïve with men. My latest—Paul Danvers—was a perfect example. Handsome as could be, I thought he was as in love with me as I had been with him. We had made love countless times since I had started dating him in the spring. I had obeyed his every wish and satisfied his every whim.

I had only seen Paul once since the breakup. Fortunately, we had no classes together. When I had seen him, he was walking with one of the girls from another sorority. She spotted me first, grinning as if to rub it in my face that she had him now and I was out of luck. I wasn't as hurt by that, though, as I was by Paul's reaction: he ignored me. A greeting died on my lips as he looked away and hustled his new girl past me as quickly as he could.

Our breakup two weeks ago was still a source of pain for me, and even Conrad's pronouncement that I shouldn't be dating men anyway

wasn't enough to assuage the longing. But even the April side of me was so pissed at Paul for breaking up with me so he could have another girl. Oh, I wanted nothing to do with Paul. He had betrayed me and I didn't even want to speak to the bastard again. Thank God we had no classes together. But the problem was that I would have to find another boyfriend in a hurry or the girls in the sorority would start to wonder what was wrong with me. What if one of those girls was working for The Judge?

The solution was obvious. Chip had as much as agreed to it. Chip would have to become my new boyfriend, I decided. I had already determined it would make our contacts look perfectly normal. Of course, the Conrad side of me offered a note of niggling doubt. Was the only reason I was going to date Chip for an effective cover? Would I have been nearly as quick to arrive at that solution if Chip had been a scrawny, pimple-faced boy with bad breath? No, probably not. I had to admit that part of my willingness stemmed from the fact that he was a very good-looking guy, but even the Conrad side of my mind had to admit I would have to date someone just to look normal and it might as well be Chip.

My first real date with Chip began that Friday evening. He was adorably nervous as he waited for me in the living room of the sorority house. I can't say that I blamed him. I could remember Conrad's college days and the many waits he had experienced in the living room of sorority houses while girl after girl 'casually' trooped by to get a look at the new guy her sorority sister had agreed to go out with. Poor Chip. He'd be discussed and rated for acceptability by a dozen girls before I ever walked down the stairs to meet him.

Of course I was a little nervous, too. Sure, as April Stewart I had dated a number of guys—some of which I had known less about than I knew about Chip. But now I had the memories of my former life to contend with as well, and I kept trying to switch my perspective of the date from female to male and back again every few minutes. I hadn't been able even to get dressed without unwanted thoughts from my male side. I had decided upon the skirt and sweater look for a cool fall

evening. A gray sweater, black skirt cut short but not quite a miniskirt, black tights and black flats gave me the well-dressed coed look, but the Conrad in me wondered why I was going to so much trouble for someone I was dating only out of convenience. I had no answer for the suspicious bastard.

Fortunately, Chip was an easy guy to get to know. We decided to share a pizza at Leonardo's, a little pizza place just off campus. Then we would walk over to the Student Union where fairly new movies were shown every weekend. It wasn't exactly a thirty-six screen multiplex cinema with auditorium seating, but it was close, cheap and usually fun. I knew a TA didn't make a whole lot of money, so it was fine with me.

The walk across campus gave Chip a chance to fill me in on some of the elements of Ovid I hadn't known. He told me about the transparent people—shades he called them. According to Corey, the leaders of some of the other cells thought the shades were just placeholders—not real at all and just elaborate figures of our imagination.

"I don't believe that, though," Chip told me as we neared the entrance to Leonardo's. "I believe they're some form of life—spirits if you will. They animate the residents of Ovid until The Judge has a victim to put in their place."

"So you mean there was a shade pretending to be April Stewart until I came along?"

He shook his head as he opened the door. "No, not pretending. The shades are as real as anyone else, and they think they're who they look like. I always treat them as real people. They're intelligent and in spite of their insubstantial appearance, they're solid."

As if to prove a point, a short bearded man, transparent with a dark Mediterranean appearance smiled at us from behind two menus.

"Welcome to Leonardo's. Two?"

We talked about other things as we ate—classes, our families (or at least the families our current identities were supposed to have. I was relieved to note that Chip's family in Oklahoma City seemed to be real.

That meant mine probably was as well. I had been concerned that our lives outside of Ovid were merely false memories we had been given. Quietly so other around us couldn't hear, Chip assured me that our families were real. Later as we walked over to the Student Union, he explained, "I don't think it was always this way. At one time, some of the families outside Ovid must have been imaginary. Nancy has been here in Ovid for several years and remembered when trips out of Ovid to visit relatives had been nothing more than enhanced dreams.

"She told me that when she first got her real memories back, she went on a trip to Kansas City to visit her husband's family. She thought it was going to be her chance to get away. Then when they reached the edge of town, her husband pulled over to the side of the road as if he were in a trance. She blacked out then, and when she awoke, they were driving back into town and four days had gone by. She 'remembered' their trip but knew it had never really occurred."

"But now you say it's all real?" I pressed. Ever since I had learned about the gods and Ovid, I had harbored a secret fear that my parents and my sisters back in Tulsa were no more than figments of my imagination.

"Yes," he replied with a knowing nod. "I'm not sure how, but our families are real. I suspect the gods have managed to find families who have lost loved ones and replace memories of them with memories of us."

"But that's horrible! That would mean that my parents have completely forgotten a daughter that they lost." I had visions of sad graves left unattended and fond memories of loved ones now lost forever.

"But if I'm right, your parents are happy in the knowledge that you are their daughter and that no harm ever befell you."

"You sound as if you're defending the gods," I grumbled pushing my hands deeper into the pockets of my jacket as we walked. I felt cold, and it wasn't just the temperature of the dusky evening.

He shrugged. "Maybe, but I don't think like Corey and Nancy do. I'm not convinced that everything the gods do is out of malicious intent. Of

course maybe getting one's sex changed has something to do with their line of thought."

Did it? Did I think like Nancy and Corey thought? I wasn't sure. They seemed to hate being women. They wanted their male lives back—or at least someone's male life. I wasn't sure I did. While I hadn't completely made up my mind, I was becoming more convinced that being April Stewart was not all that bad—especially with the changes I had begun to make in her—my—life.

Once we were out of the evening chill and in the Student Union where we both saw many familiar faces, I began to feel normal again. Or perhaps I should say I began to feel normal as April Stewart. A couple of my sorority sisters were there, and of course they came over with their dates anxious to meet Chip. I found myself proud to introduce him to them. He wasn't the hunk Paul had been, but he was bright and friendly, two things Paul was not. Come to think of it, what had I seen in Paul anyway?

The movie was one that had been around for a while but I had missed it on its first run. It was called '*Legally Blonde*' with Reese Witherspoon. I think I had avoided it because it looked pretty lame with Witherspoon playing a vacuous Valley Girl who had somehow managed to get into law school. The funny thing was that as I watched it, I realized there was more to her role than I had imagined. I was so engrossed in the movie that I scarcely noticed when Chip put an arm around me. Instinctively, I snuggled against him without losing my concentration on the movie.

After a while, I began to identify with Witherspoon's character. I began to realize I was very much like the girl she portrayed. Oh, that isn't to say that I was beauty pageant 'cutesy' like her character started off. And I didn't have a little dog, seldom wore heels of more than an inch or so, and hadn't been looking for a proposal of marriage—at least not yet. But like her character, I had devoted considerable effort to my social life with little thought of what the future might bring. The Conrad in me, always goal-oriented and ambitious, found enough parallels between my life as April and Witherspoon's character to be disturbing.

Odds were good that I was stuck as April Stewart forever. Unlike Corey or Nancy, I had no real hopes of being turned back into a man no matter how successful we were in learning about the gods. But I had no intention of being stuck as the borderline bimbo April seemed to be taken as. That was when I really got into Witherspoon's metamorphosis, and by the end of the movie, I was well satisfied with the results. I only hoped April Stewart's life would turn out as well.

"Did you like it?"

I was leaning into Chip's body as we walked back across campus. His arm was encircling my waist and I found that I actually liked it there. It made me warm against the chill of the evening and helped me feel somehow secure. "Yeah, it was cute," I replied. "Maybe I ought to do that."

"Do what?"

"Go to law school." Many—in fact most—of my associates in Congress had law degrees, although many had never been practicing lawyers. I had always felt a little disadvantaged when bills were being brought to the floor and often had to depend too heavily upon my staff for the legal details. It might be fun to get a law degree this time around.

"You can if you want to," Chip commented. "Since they don't think you have your memories, they won't stop you from leaving town to go to law school."

There was another reason to be careful in Ovid. Without my memories of my previous life, I was no danger to the gods. However, if they knew I was aware of who I had been, I might not be allowed to leave town at all. From the way Corey and the others talked, that was the way it worked. The Rems were strictly controlled while the rest of us lived pretty normal lives, including no real restrictions on travel.

All too soon, we were at the front door of my sorority house. "I had a great time tonight," I told Chip, facing him at the door. It was true, too. Chip was a refreshing change from the guys I had dated before. He was the first guy I had dated in a long time who hadn't tried to get his hands in my pants on the first date. Of course, I guess that just

showed what bad taste I had shown in men.

Oh, he did kiss me goodnight, but it was a gentle kiss that even the Conrad in me seemed to find unobjectionable. I returned it in kind, thinking as I did that in spite of its gentleness, it was the most dramatic kiss I had enjoyed in a long time.

We mumbled goodnight to each other and I slipped into the still-lit living room of the sorority, steeling myself against the barrage of questions from the dateless ones.

“What’s he like?”

“How far did you let him go?”

“Is he in a fraternity?”

“Which one?”

“He’s a serial killer; we had sex twelve times—thirteen if you count the time with the dog. And he’s too cool for a fraternity.”

“Aw!” came the collective moan from the four girls who had interrupted a marathon bridge game to interrogate me. I just smiled and headed up to my room. Part of the smile was inward, wondering what the four girls would have thought if I had told them the truth about Chip.

Chip called me on Saturday to ask me out again. I begged off because I really did have a lot of schoolwork to do which would take me the rest of the weekend. As April, I had been so wrapped up in my social life that I had let my studies slide. Now I had a lot of making up to do. I was carrying no more than a C in every subject. That was no longer acceptable. I was discovering the Conrad side of my personality was far too ambitious to accept mediocrity.

It’s funny, but I had never thought of my performance in class as mediocre before. Now I found myself snorting in contempt at the girls in the house who were throwing themselves in front of boys at the expense of their studies. But it wasn’t as if I was seeing them just through Conrad’s eyes. I still thought of myself as April Stewart in spite of Conrad’s vivid memories. It was as if the Conrad persona had forced me to awaken a part of myself that I had never recognized

before.

It even made me rethink my agreement to join Corey's cell. Much of my reason for joining was because I was infuriated at the thought of anyone—even a god—messing with my life or more nobly, the lives of others. Unlike Nancy or Corey, I didn't want to be a man again. Well, maybe it wouldn't be so bad to be male again if I could be a male my—April's—age. But I didn't want to be a middle-aged man again. Even the Conrad side of me had come to realize that youth as a girl was preferable to middle age in either sex.

Besides, all of my thoughts for more than two years were the thoughts of a young woman. Kissing Chip romantically was actually pleasant—once Conrad got over his misgivings. The thought of kissing one of my sorority sisters romantically didn't do a whole lot for me. Of course, part of that acceptance from my Conrad side probably had something to do with the fact that as Conrad Williams, I had not enjoyed a very good love life. My wife and I had maintained our marriage primarily for political reasons, and while I knew she had enjoyed a discrete tryst or two (or more), I had restrained myself. The media was always ready to unveil a sexual scandal involving a politician and I had always valued my political life over my sexual life.

Of course now, I didn't have a political life to worry about. And as April, I had enjoyed an active sexual life. Even guys like Paul who I never wanted to see again had been darn good in bed. I had memories of Conrad's sexual endeavors, and there was nothing in any of them to compare with the experiences I had enjoyed as April.

So why was I avoiding Chip?

Well, I wasn't, I reminded myself. I just had a lot of studying to do. Chip could wait.

I was taken aback by my own thought, putting the textbook I had been reading aside on my desk and leaning back. Sure, I had a lot of studying to do, but why did Chip have to wait?

Conrad could influence April but the opposite was true as well. Both sides of my personality were strong enough to make themselves

heard, and it was the April side of me that was able to realize that Chip wasn't the only person I had made wait in my life. My wife—Conrad's wife—had been forced to wait, too. First, Louise had to wait while I established my military career. When my wounds forced me to give up on my goals in the military, she had to wait while I established myself as a politician worthy enough to rise to the very pinnacle of power. Meetings, junkets, speeches, and strategy sessions all took time away from a marriage, and since Louise couldn't have children, she didn't even have motherhood to console her from my absence. No wonder she hated me. I almost hated myself.

On an impulse, I picked up the phone and dialed Chip's number.

"Hello?"

"Hi. I just felt like a study break."

"Uh... you mean just on the phone?"

"I had something a little more personal in mind."

"I can be there in ten minutes... no, make that fifteen. I need to shave."

I was actually giggling when I hung up the phone.

I suppose all work and no play was making April a very dull girl. I resolved to remedy that situation. No, I wasn't reverting to the old April's routine of social before scholastic. I was merely learning to bring the two into balance.

The day was warm for late October, but the growing piles of leaves in Sooner Park were ample evidence that winter was near. I was glad I had chosen to wear a tank top and shorts. It would probably be my last chance to do so, for even then I knew I'd be too cool once the sun began to set.

"That tree used to be a drug dealer," Chip told me, pointing at a large oak near the entrance to the park. "Or so they say."

"Huh?" I returned, stopping to look at the majestic tree. "The Judge can do that, too?"

Chip nodded. "Yeah. I guess that makes us a couple of the lucky ones. He can change people into plants or animals if he wants to. From what I hear, he reserves fates like that for the criminal element. You notice there aren't any drugs in Ovid."

I hadn't really thought about that before. Sure, other places had drugs, but there weren't any in Ovid. Come to think of it, no one smoked either. Yet in spite of this being different from the outside world, it had seemed entirely normal to me until Chip had mentioned it.

"Maybe The Judge isn't such a bad guy after all," I commented, meaning it as I looked at the tree again. I thought back at all the hours we spent in Congress debating anti-drug bills that never seemed to work. Maybe changing dealers into trees was the answer. Jupiter for President!

To any curious eyes, we appeared to be just two young people enjoying a fleetingly warm Saturday, and I suppose that was just what we were. Chip had brought along a Frisbee which we threw for awhile. Fortunately, he took it easy on me. I was cursed with being the poster child for throwing like a girl. Later we trudged through the leaves, kicking them up in the light breeze and laughing like two small children. We even threw ourselves down in a pile of leaves, wrestling with each other until our lips met...

It was more than just the warmth of the sun that made my body melt as we lay there together. As Conrad, I had denied myself the physical love of another human being for far too long, and as April, I had indulged in the physical without fully appreciating any deeper relationship. But that was changing now.

"Chip..."

He propped up on one arm. "Yes?"

"Let's go back to your place."

The expression on his face left no doubt that he understood exactly what I was proposing. "Are you sure?"

"Aren't you?"

He smiled. "I've wanted to do that since the moment I met you."

I feigned shock. "What? You've always wanted to make love to a middle-aged politician?"

He leaned over and gave me a gentle kiss. "What middle-aged politician?"

Conrad kept his mental mouth shut, for which I will be eternally grateful for I had never had a lover like Chip before. He was gentle with me, and unlike Paul whose idea of foreplay was like Jesse James hopping in the saddle for a getaway after a bank robbery, Chip made very sure I was ready before he entered me. Ready? No, that word doesn't convey what he did to me. I was aching with desire when he finally pushed in.

When I was finally able to think with my mind again, Chip was holding me gently. I had never had a lover like him before. Oh, that makes it sound as if I had had many. In fact, Chip was on a very short list. Since graduating from high school I had been what is commonly referred to as "serially monogamous." Sure, I made love to my boyfriends, but only after we had managed to establish a non-sexual relationship first.

Until Paul.

When Paul took me I suppose it could have been construed as rape. After all, I told him no but forgave him afterward. Lying there, I began to realize that with Paul I had begun to slide down a very slippery slope. With the other boys, I made love; with Paul, I had sex. If I hadn't awakened the Conrad side of me, I might have run right into the arms of another Paul. Conrad emerged for just a moment to ask me how I had ever gotten mixed up with a jerk like Paul. I had no answer for him.

Chip hugged me a little tighter, making me feel good. "Look, I'm sorry..."

"Sorry for what?" I asked, confused.

"I didn't mean for us to... you know."

I pulled out of his embrace and faced him eye to eye. To his credit, he met my gaze instead of looking down at my bare breasts. "Look, I asked you as I remember."

He looked down at the wrinkled sheet between us. "But I never meant to..."

"Not at all?" I teased.

That got a little smile out of him. "Well, maybe sometime. I just..." He leaned back. "April, I don't know what it is, but I was attracted to you the moment I saw you. But I figured you'd be like Corey and Nancy... you know, upset over being a girl. I didn't want to impose."

"I'm not Nancy or Corey," I reminded him. "Sure, I remember being a man. I was a pretty good man, too. But until a few days ago, I thought I had always been April Stewart. Yeah, I can understand how Corey and Nancy want to be men again, but I don't. Conrad Williams is quickly becoming like a favorite uncle. He can give me advice and hold my hand but he can't run my life."

Chip nodded. "I think I understand. That's the way I feel about Flip. He's part of me but he isn't all that is me. Does that make sense?"

"Probably only to someone like me," I laughed.

We were both silent for a moment until I looked down and saw that his withered penis was starting to recover. "Want another dance?" I asked him flippantly.

"I don't know if I can," he groaned.

"Sure you can," I replied, taking the uncertain member in my hand as I bent over to take him in my mouth.

"Look, you don't have to..."

"But I want to," I informed him. Jeff, my first lover after high school liked blowjobs, and I found out I really didn't mind giving them.

"But..."

"Quiet! I'm busy."

He was quiet but not for long...

If I had expected joining the cell to be like starring in a spy movie, I would have been disappointed. Corey only contacted me once and that was by phone. She told me in a very conversational tone that there was an opening for a student assistant in President Vest's office. To anyone listening in on the phone, it would have sounded as if an employee of the college was just trying to help a struggling student she knew get a part-time job. I realized, though, that it was actually my marching orders. I had no idea why Corey wanted me to take the job but I dutifully rushed right over to Administration and applied for the job. Something told me the fix was in and no matter how many students applied the job would be mine.

I didn't hear back from Admin until Friday, but the week was busy enough that I didn't have much time to think about it. As if catching up in all my classes wasn't going to be hard enough, my period hit on Monday. No wonder I had been so damned horny over the weekend. I had left Chip with a smile on his face that might never go away. Fortunately, my period was a fairly mild one so it didn't give me cause to rethink my decision to stay female no matter what happened. Of course, the remaining Conrad attitudes made it a little harder to deal with my period but not so much harder that I couldn't handle it.

The strangest thing to happen to me that week was completely unexpected. I was sitting on a couch in the living room of the sorority house when it began. It was Wednesday and my period was down to being a mild annoyance. I had just finished lunch and didn't have a class until two, so I used the time to study on the couch since I was one of the few in the house without a one o'clock class.

I heard a car pull up in front of the house, and out of curiosity I craned my neck around to see a white police cruiser with Ovid Municipal Police in blue letters on the side of the car. A tall, lanky officer got out of the driver's side and I felt a frigid chill as I recognized him as the very one who had escorted Conrad Williams and his party into The Judge's courtroom.

Had the cell been uncovered? I wondered fearfully. Surely it couldn't

have been, could it? And if it was, what was going to happen to me? What was going to happen to the others—especially Chip? What if they took us before The Judge and changed us again and we forgot once more? I couldn't stand the thought of losing Chip that way.

It was with deep relief that I saw him walk over to the passenger door and open it. There was a girl sitting there and I knew at once she had to be one of my sorority sisters. I chastised myself then for being relieved. One of my sisters wouldn't be riding in a police car for no reason. I wondered who it was and what had happened to her.

She got out of the car with a little assistance from the officer—Mercer was his name I remembered. She was about my height and build, wearing tight jeans and a white cotton blouse. Her hair was light blonde and there was a look of confusion on her pretty face. "Oh God, it's Laurel!" I mumbled out loud, realizing at once that it was my roommate, Laurel Jacobson.

But she looked different, I thought to myself as she walked unsteadily up the sidewalk on the arm of Officer Mercer. It took me a moment to realize what was different—I could no longer see through her. She was as solid as I was, and that meant...

I liked Laurel; I really did. We had become friends from the first moment we pledged together. When I had awakened with Conrad's memories and saw for the first time the faintly transparent nature of my roommate, I was a little frightened, but I realized quickly that it was still Laurel. In my short time of awareness in Ovid, I knew that the Laurel I had known and who had been my best friend in the sorority was no more. The Judge had changed another poor unwary soul into Laurel to replace my friend and I hated him for it.

Did the girl know who she had been? It was hard to say, but from the shock on her face, I had to guess she was just coming to grips with the fact that something she would have believed impossible if she had ever thought about it had, indeed, happened to her.

I was alone in the living room and unsure as to how I should react to her. I couldn't let on that I knew what had happened to her. If I did, I'd

risk the entire cell. I'd have to play it cool and just treat her as if there was nothing wrong. I braced myself to not act strangely when the officer and his charge entered.

Fortunately, I didn't have to worry about it. Before they came in, Myra Smithwick bolted down the stairs as if she were on a mission. She glanced over at me, surprised to see me sitting there, but she recovered quickly. I just tried to act normally and looked back down at the textbook I had been studying just as the door opened.

"Can I help you?" Myra asked, but I could tell from her voice and the lack of surprise upon seeing the officer that she had been expecting him.

"Ms. Jacobson here was feeling a little faint," Officer Mercer said in his official, noncommittal voice. "I decided it would be best if I gave her a ride home."

"Laurel!" I gasped in my best acting style. "What's wrong?" I threw the book down and rushed over to her, taking her trembling hand in mine. I didn't really want to do it and frighten her more but it wouldn't have seemed natural if I hadn't been concerned about my roommate and best friend. After all, I wasn't supposed to know what was really happening, was I?

"She should be all right," Officer Mercer assured us, looking at me as if he had never seen me before. Apparently I wasn't the only good actor in the room. "She should be fine with a little rest."

I put my arm around her. "I'll take her up to our room and put her in bed."

"No, April, I'll do it," Myra volunteered suddenly. "You have a class at two, don't you?"

"Well, yes..."

"Then let me take her up," she offered holding Laurel from the other side. "You go ahead and go to class."

"I'd be glad to drive you to your class," Officer Mercer interjected.

Sure. He just wanted to make certain I wasn't around when Myra took care of Laurel. It would have been only natural for April to do just what I was about to do—help Myra with my roommate. I had to know what was going on, but I didn't dare seem too curious. "Thanks for the offer," I told Officer Mercer as calmly as I could. "My class is only a couple of blocks and I need the exercise after lunch. I'll just walk."

Myra had already gotten Laurel halfway up the stairs and was looking around to make sure I was gone. I dramatically looked down at my watch. "Oh! I didn't realize it was so late! I'd better start walking now." I gathered up my text and a notebook and hustled out of the house without looking back. In a moment, I heard the door of the police car open and shut, and seconds later watched as Officer Mercer's car turned at the corner and headed in the general direction of City Hall. When I was sure he was gone, I doubled back to the house.

I tiptoed up the stairs of the sorority house to the third floor landing. The room I shared with Laurel was there and I was pretty sure Myra would have taken her there since her own room was in a busier part of the house. There were fewer rooms on the third floor and all of my sorority sisters who shared the floor were in class. As a result, I had to be very quiet. I could hear Myra's muffled voice through the closed door of my room.

"...a few days to get settled in," she was saying. "Until then, you'll need to be careful. Not everyone remembers their previous lives."

"Does... does my roommate? What did you say her name was?" Laurel's voice asked timidly.

"April Stewart," Myra replied. "And no, she doesn't remember who she was."

"Was she a... a... man before—like me?"

"I don't really know."

There was a sudden tearful cry from the new girl. "Oh, I can't do this! I can't be a girl. You've got to take me back to The Judge. He's made a terrible mistake."

“It wouldn’t do you any good,” Myra insisted. “Believe me, I know. My mother works for Susan Jager—your defense counsel. It can be downright dangerous trying to get The Judge to change his mind. I’ve never seen it happen myself.”

“But what am I supposed to do?” she wailed. “Get your notebook and go to class. You’ve got a three o’clock history class. I’ll walk you there.”

“I can’t go out like this!”

They continued talking, but I couldn’t stay and listen as I heard the front door open and close and realized that a couple of the girls were coming home from class. I hurriedly scrambled down the stairs. It wouldn’t do for them to see me standing outside my own door listening to a private conversation. That wouldn’t be cool and might even be dangerous.

When I got back from my afternoon classes, I knew I’d have to act like nothing was wrong when I saw Laurel. It wasn’t easy to do. She got back to the room a few minutes after I did and nervously greeted me, mumbling my name as if she wasn’t really sure about who I was. She was obviously uncomfortable with her new form, and I was actually a little amused to see her trying to move like a girl but obviously having difficulty with it.

We settled in to study, each at our own desk, but I could almost feel Laurel’s tension as she tried to reconcile herself to her new existence. Dinner would be served in half an hour and I knew she would not be in any fit state to face all of her new sorority sisters at the dinner table. I tried to imagine what it must be like for her. Like me, she had been male, but unlike me, she had not had the opportunity to know what it was like to be a girl for two years before discovering her previous existence. Just think—that morning she had been a man and yet here she was now, a girl. At least like me she was wearing jeans, but I knew all too well how different those jeans felt on a female body, with its small waist and protruding hips and the strange tightness between the legs where something should have been bulging.

Well, it was time for me to do my good deed of the day. “I think we’re having fried chicken tonight,” I began.

“Huh?”

“You know, for dinner—fried chicken,” I clarified, leaning back in my chair as I faced my new roommate. “I’m just not in the mood for it. Wanna get a burger with me?”

I could see in her eyes that she was torn between having to face an entire dining room full of girls or facing the terror of leaving the confines of the house as an attractive young woman.

“Come on,” I urged. “I’ll even buy.”

“O... Okay,” she agreed timidly. “But what do I wear? I mean...”

“You look fine,” I assured her. And she did, too. Laurel was very attractive. Someday, she’d come to appreciate that fact but for the present it would have frightened her half to death to know she’d be turning the heads of every boy we passed.

She actually loosened up a little once we got in my car. My little Toyota was comfortable and just the right size for us girls. As I drove to Rusty’s Burger Barn, she looked around with curiosity as if she had never seen any of the town before. I suppose she hadn’t seen much of it—just the route to City Hall and then to the sorority house after her ‘trial.’

I began to think as we entered Rusty’s that I might have made a mistake in unveiling her to the public so soon. Every male eye was following us. In my time as April, I had gotten used to it—even enjoying it—and having Conrad’s memories again did little to dampen that enjoyment, but for Laurel, it was a new and unnerving experience. As quickly as I could, I hustled her to a table toward the back of the room and faced her away from the interested stares.

“I’m sorry if I haven’t been myself today, April.” She thought for a moment of what she had said and giggled nervously.

“What’s so funny?” I asked innocently.

“Oh! Nothing really,” she tried to cover. I just smiled as if I had no idea what she was talking about.

“April... can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Are you happy?”

“Happy with what?”

She shrugged. “Your life—who you are. Would you be anyone else if you had the chance?”

It was an intriguing question. Of course, Laurel just wanted to know if life in Ovid was all it was cracked up to be. She had been a male from somewhere else and wanted confirmation from a neutral source. Although she had been led to believe I had no knowledge of my previous life, she wanted to know if happiness in Ovid was even possible.

“I’m pretty happy,” I told her honestly. “As for being someone else, well I suppose it would depend upon who that someone else was.”

“Would you want to be a man?” she pressed.

I almost gave her a glib “no” but I realized that wasn’t what she was really looking for. “I suppose I wouldn’t mind being a man...” I trailed off. I had almost slipped up and added “again” to that statement. “But I don’t mind being a girl either.” I paused. “Do you?”

She flinched at the question. “I’m not sure. I... that is, a man is bigger and stronger—more confident.”

Our discussion was interrupted by our waitress, a girl I knew from a couple of classes. I ordered with Laurel just having what I was having. She hadn’t had a chance to look at the menu and didn’t want me to know it. Once we each had a Diet Coke in front of us, I picked up the conversation again.

“I’ll grant men are bigger and stronger for the most part,” I began. “But as for men being more confident, I think that depends upon the man—or woman.”

“But look at us!” Laurel insisted. “How can we be confident when we wear makeup and revealing clothes just to attract men?”

“I wouldn’t say we’re wearing revealing clothes right now,” I pointed out. “In fact, we’re about as unrevealing as we could be.”

“Wrong!” she countered. “Sure, we’re both wearing jeans, but look at how they fit. Guys wear loose, comfortable jeans while I feel like five pounds of hamburger stuffed into a two-pound bag. And look at our sweaters! They’re designed to show off our breasts—not keep us warm. Plus they’re both pink!”

Actually, mine was salmon-colored but that was a nit. “What’s wrong with being attractive?” I asked.

For the moment, the new Laurel couldn’t think of a good answer, so I pressed on. “Look, Laurel, I don’t know why you’re obsessing on this. Sure, we dress to attract guys, but we also dress that way because it makes us feel good to be attractive—more confident if you will. Besides, think of the power it gives us.”

“Power?”

“Turn around quickly and look at those two guys across the room.”

She did, turning back quickly, her face red. “Oh Jesus, they’re looking at us.”

“Damned straight, and I’d be plenty pissed if they weren’t,” I retorted. “All we have to do is nod our heads and they’ll be over here in a heartbeat eating out of our hands.”

“So?” Her eyes told me that wasn’t something she wanted to happen.

“So think about if you were a guy.” I knew that wouldn’t be too hard for her. “If we were two guys and they were two attractive girls, do you think we could just nod our heads and have them come running over to us? Who has the power, dear?”

I could tell from the expression on her face that as a man, she had never had that sort of power. Even many women lacked it, but she wouldn’t. She and I were both attractive enough to be in control of our

relationships if we chose to be. As April alone, even I hadn't realized that, but with Conrad's knowledge to draw upon, I knew I could be a much stronger woman. Since Laurel remembered her manhood, so could she. Our food was delivered about then, but as we ate, I could see the wheels turning in Laurel's head. It would take some time, but whoever Laurel had been as a man would start to fade, and what remained would be a strong woman, much like the Laurel I had always called my friend.

Between dating Chip, building up my grades, and working with Laurel, I didn't have time to think about anything else. But Friday of that week, something else was added to my plate. Admin called up to tell me that I had the part-time job in President Vest's office. An hour later, Corey called me. There was going to be a meeting of the cell that afternoon.

We met at Corey's apartment. Nancy was already there as Chip and I entered together. Corey looked at us with amusement, so I guess my dating Chip was no big surprise. Chip and I were going out for dinner together after the meeting.

Nancy was looking nervously at her watch. It made sense, I guess. She was the only one in the cell who had a family to worry about. I supposed her husband and kids would wonder if she was late.

"We've had a break," Corey said happily once we had all made ourselves comfortable in the small living room of her apartment. "It may bring The Judge and his cronies to heel once and for all."

The twisted sensation I felt in my stomach was evidence at how comfortable I had become with my life. On a day-to-day level, I could completely forget about the cell and any activities against the gods. The initial shock of learning I had once been a man had ebbed away, and my April persona and my Conrad persona had merged together to form a new person—a young woman who was attractive, intelligent, and confident in her love life. Now the commitment I had given to the cell in a moment of confusion was coming home to roost.

I looked with concern at Chip and he returned the look. Unlike Nancy who was becoming quite animated at the thought of bringing down the

gods, Chip was as disturbed as I was. Corey didn't seem to notice as she dropped the big bombshell on me. "And April, you'll be our most important element."

"Me?" I squeaked. I was a soprano but I really didn't think my voice could go that high.

Corey nodded with a proud smile. "Of course. Why do you think I got you a job in President Vest's office? Betty Vest is one of them—one of the gods. She's Vesta."

"Vesta?" I repeated stupidly. Sure, I had heard of Mars, Jupiter, Mercury and Venus—but Vesta?

"She was the goddess of the hearth," Corey explained as if talking to a stupid child. "Didn't they teach you anything in school?"

"Roman myths weren't exactly the meat and potatoes of the curriculum at the University of Oklahoma," I replied defensively.

Corey looked as if she were going to make a snide comment but let it go. I supposed she had been about to tell me that she had matriculated at the Harvard Business School and she still knew who Vesta was. Instead she continued, "Vesta is one of the inner circle of the gods. We've gotten a report that the inner circle feels the need to communicate better with each other. They've decided to install a very private computer network which will allow them to see the same information more quickly."

"It sounds more like General Motors than Olympus," Nancy commented.

"Up until now, they've all had to use a single computer over at Del's Computers on Main Street. But that system has been compromised. Too many locals know about it. So The Judge decided secure terminals would be installed at the work locations of the entire inner circle—the police station, March's Department Store, the public school district, City Hall, and..."

"President Vest's office," I completed with a sigh.

"Exactly."

“But I’m no computer expert,” I protested. “You said yourself these would be secure terminals. How can I do anything with the system without the passwords?”

Corey smiled, anticipating the question. “One of our other cells has gotten us the key,” she announced, pulling a small flat pad out of her purse. It was gray and looked very flexible.

“So okay, what is it?” Chip wanted to know.

“It’s a device for determining keystrokes,” she explained. “April will have to slip this under the keyboard like this...” She turned to her computer desk and slipped the pad underneath the keyboard. I had to admit it was for all practical purposes invisible. “Then you just type something.” She demonstrated on the keyboard. “Then when you remove it, you attach it to a computer with a USB port and it downloads every keystroke.”

I knew what was coming next and gritted my teeth as she continued, “Then all April has to do is go back in the office, enter the passwords we’ve captured here, and enter the system. She downloads as much as she can to a CD and gets out.”

The only part of the plan I liked was that last part—the getting out part.

“But how will I know what I’m looking for?” I asked.

“I’ll help you with that,” Nancy said. “I’ve had to work with the college’s computer system for a while. I can tell you which files to ignore.”

I made arrangements to meet with Nancy after work the next day at the Student Health Center where she could review the college’s system for me. Corey handed me the device which would hopefully give us the passwords and wished me luck. I realized I hadn’t even reported for work in President Vest’s office and already I was set to betray her.

“You don’t look happy,” Chip commented when we were safely away from the meeting and back in his apartment.

“I’m not,” I admitted morosely as I sat there on his couch holding the spying device in front of me as if it were a dead snake. “Chip, what

have we gotten ourselves into? Look at us. We're both happy to be who we are—happy to be with each other. Is Ovid such a bad place?"

"I thought you were upset with the fact that they changed you without your consent," Chip pointed out as he sat down beside me and put a comforting arm around me.

I was near tears. "I am upset about that. Of course I am. Who wouldn't be? But think about it, Chip. You and I each woke up one day and realized we had been other people. What did we do about it? We integrated those other people into who we are now. What was Chip like before you found out about Flip?"

Chip grinned sheepishly. "He was kind of a nerd, I guess. A little socially retarded would be one way of putting it."

"And look at who you are today," I told him. "You're confident, socially skilled, intelligent..."

"Please! You're going to make me blush."

"Not to mention good looking..."

His arm held me tighter as I looked into his eyes. Suddenly, my concerns ebbed and something told me we were in for a late dinner that night...

Working with Nancy on the computer was a better experience than I had anticipated. Whenever I had been in a meeting with Nancy, she had always seemed sullen. No, sullen isn't the right word; that's too strong. I guess I would describe her as withdrawn. I couldn't blame her, really. From what Chip had told me, she had gone from a young, successful single doctor to a married woman pregnant with her second child by the time she realized who she had been.

"Hi April," she greeted me with a small but friendly smile. It was the end of the regular workday when I arrived. We arranged that so we could have some privacy. I was amazed at how cheerful she seemed as she walked me through the fundamentals of the computer system I would have to master before I could get at the programs I needed.

“You’re a quick learner,” she complimented me as my fingers whizzed over the keyboard.

“Thanks,” I told her, not daring to look away from the screen. At last, the desired information came up on screen and I leaned back in relief. After all, the quicker I was able to get to this point, the quicker I’d be able to get out of the president’s office. I had no desire to be caught by one of the gods.

“April, why are you helping us?”

I turned to Nancy who was seated right next to me. I looked into her eyes, determining that it was just curiosity and not some suspicion which had prompted the question. “I guess it’s a matter of control,” I replied after thinking a moment. “In the military and in politics, I always felt like I was in control of the situation. What The Judge did to me stripped me of that control. Now, I’ve got it back. I want to know why he did it.”

“I suspect you want to stay as you are, though,” she ventured.

I blushed. “Is it that obvious?”

“You mean you and Chip?”

I blushed again. “That, too. I mean is it so obvious that I want to stay a girl. I know you don’t want to, but...”

Nancy chuckled, “What gave you the idea I didn’t want to stay female?”

If it were possible, I was suddenly even more embarrassed. “Oh, well, Corey thinks you want to be a man again. So does Chip for that matter.”

“Well, I suppose I did once upon a time,” Nancy admitted with a shy grin. “It was quite a shock to wake up one morning and remember who I had been while seeing my belly all pooched out. I assume you knew about that?”

I nodded.

“Well, it really bummed me at first. If somebody had offered me the

chance to go back to being a man right then, I would have done it in a heartbeat. Then I got to know Dan—my husband—and my son, Billy. I guess I never realized what it was like to have a family like that.”

“So why are you involved in all this if you’re happy?” I blurted out.

“Happy?” She seemed a little surprised at that word. “No, April, I’m not happy—at least not the way I’d like to be. You see, all I am here is a glorified receptionist.”

“I thought you were a nurse...”

She laughed. It was a bitter laugh. “No, I’m not even an RN. Here I am with all the memories of a Harvard Medical School education and I can’t even treat students coming in here with a simple case of the sniffles.” She hugged herself. “April, I feel so useless! Today training you was the first worthwhile thing I’ve done at work in weeks. I go home every night to a family I’ve come to love but somehow it isn’t enough. I need to be working again at what I’m good at—being a doctor.”

It did seem to be a terrible waste of talent, I thought to myself. Maybe in a town run by gods doctors weren’t needed as much, but to waste the talents of such a person when she could have been doing so much good for the community seemed almost criminal. “So is that what you want?” I asked. “Even if it meant giving up your family to get back to your previous life?”

She shook her head, a few tears forming. “I don’t know, April. I’m not even sure there’s an old life to go back to. As nearly as we can tell, the gods erased all traces of our real lives. But if I don’t do something I was trained to do, I’m going to go crazy, and that won’t help my family a bit.”

“Well,” I said, trying to sound upbeat, “let’s see where Corey’s plan gets us. Maybe we’ll get enough goods on the gods that they’ll have to give in to our demands.”

Of course it was at that moment that I realized I had no idea what our demands were going to be. But it was way too late to worry about that

now, I thought. Corey and the other cell leaders would have our hides if we didn't follow through on the plan. I just hoped Corey and her associates knew what they were doing.

I reported for work in the president's office the following Monday. To say I was nervous was an understatement. Since learning about the gods, I had only a brief brush with Officer Mercer to test my mettle. Now I was going to be in the presence of one of the loftiest of the deities, and to make matters worse I was going to have to spy on her.

"Ms. Stewart?"

I looked up from my seat in the president's waiting room to see a woman who I recognized from the few times I had seen her at a distance as Dr. Elizabeth Vest, the President of Capta College. She had a pleasant smile on her ageless face. While her figure betrayed her appearance as that of a woman in her mature forties, her face was almost youthful, and there was only a slight trace of gray in her short, brown hair. On many women, it would make them look older, but on her it added a touch of academic distinction.

I rose nervously as she extended a hand to me. "I'm Betty Vest. You'll be working for me the next few weeks."

I took her hand as bravely as I could. What would it be like to touch a goddess? It felt warm; it felt... human. Betty Vest had a firm but somehow feminine handshake. I thought for a moment that she had a fine politician's handshake. Then I remembered that most college presidents I had met in my life were, in fact, excellent politicians in their own right. They had to be to win grants, public funds, and private endowments. Did this goddess need to do that as well?

"Nice to meet you," I managed at last when the awe dissipated.

She spent the next half hour with me going over my duties. It seemed that the installation of the new computer had disrupted things around her office. As a result, a lot of small, menial tasks had fallen behind, and I was to be the one to get things caught up.

“Will I need to learn how to operate the new computer?” I asked as innocently as I could.

President Vest—Betty rather as she was very informal—looked a little surprised. “No, that system is tied into some... secure databases that don’t concern you. In fact, I’d appreciate it if you would give that system a wide berth.”

“Of course,” I said simply, not even glancing at the new computer.

It took me two days to slip the device under the keyboard. Betty had a meeting that I knew would keep her occupied for at least two hours. Her secretary, a nice shade named Brenda Williams, had just stepped out for a short restroom break leaving me in charge. As soon as I was sure she was gone, I bolted for her desk where she kept a key for Betty’s office—a key I was probably not to know about—and quickly opened the door to the president’s office. There was nothing to placing the device under the keyboard. It fit snugly and was so thin that no one would ever notice it was there. I had everything locked up and was nonchalantly organizing some files when Brenda came back from her potty break. I was just glad she couldn’t hear the nervous pounding of my heart. I felt as if I had just survived a combat mission. How would I ever get enough time to download data from the computer?

I removed the device two days later in a similar fashion. Corey was well pleased with me when I gave it to her. I almost tried to beg off from any further covert activities, but I knew she’d never go for it. It wasn’t just that I was afraid. The fact of the matter was that I was growing to like Betty Vest. No, it went beyond just liking her. I had begun to admire her.

I guess it was the politician in me that first recognized her qualities. As I’ve already observed, college presidents must certainly be good politicians, and Betty Vest was one of the best I’ve ever met. She knew when to talk and when to shut up and listen. She knew how to bring people with opposing views together. She knew how to delegate. Her combination of tact, intelligence, and self-confidence made others look to her for leadership. And she knew how to be attractive and

feminine without losing an iota of her power and authority. The Conrad in me and the April in me both wanted to be just like her.

I thought back on my—Conrad's—desire to someday be president. Reluctantly, I began to realize I would have most likely fallen short of that goal. But Betty Vest, had she been a man, would have been a natural for the highest office in the land. She as a he would have rolled over any political opponents and gone as far as she wanted to go. Hell, maybe she wouldn't have had to be a man. The country would have a woman president someday. Maybe she would have been the first.

Betty was the first of the gods whom I got to know well. Slowly, she changed my opinion of them as capricious beings with power far beyond their intellects into one of wondering if there was some noble purpose behind Ovid. If there was, then I was on the wrong side. The thought did not sit well with me.

Still, I said nothing about this to Corey. I had committed to a side in this conflict and had no firm evidence that I had made a poor decision. I continued to report faithfully to Corey of the comings and goings of the gods as I saw them from Betty's office. Through my efforts, we were able to identify positively two minor gods who periodically visited Betty. They were Muses—attractive young women who seemed to have an influence on the academic climate at Capta. Corey seemed very pleased with my work.

The big event was still to come, though. I needed a time when both Brenda and Betty would be out of the office and I could access Betty's terminal undiscovered. Corey had given me the password: HEARTH. It made sense if a hacker knew who Betty Vest really was, but it would be meaningless to anyone else.

Unfortunately, the more time passed, the more comfortable I was becoming with the life that I had been given. I had discovered the very next weekend after I had gotten my new job that my life outside Ovid was very real. I had worried that my family in Tulsa was all a figment of my imagination. Corey, Nancy and Chip had all told me that residents weren't allowed to leave Ovid at all. I decided to test that

theory when my parents called and invited me home for the weekend. In turn, I invited Chip along as well.

“It won’t work,” Chip told me, shaking his head as we discussed the invitation over lunch a couple of days before I would have to go.

“Chip, I can understand why the gods might try to keep the people here who remember being changed, but they don’t know we have our memories.”

“And this might be a way for them to find out,” he pointed out. “That’s why I’ve never left Ovid. What if we reach the edge of town and our memories trigger some sort of alarm. It’s too dangerous.”

I folded my arms in defiance. “Well, I’m going with you or without you.”

In the few weeks we had been friends and then lovers, Chip had come to know that once I had made up my mind on an issue, there would be no changing my mind. Conrad had been a stubborn cuss and April was, too. At last he sighed and said, “All right. I’ll come with you—but only to keep you out of trouble.”

Chip was almost cringing as we reached the Ovid city limits. I have to admit I was feeling a few butterflies as well, but as I had suspected, nothing happened. My hands relaxed on the steering wheel as I watched the valley disappear in my rear-view mirror. I aimed the car in the general direction of where I thought Tulsa should be and in a short time, we were on the main highway heading for Tulsa.

The April side of my mind knew just where to go, and although most of Conrad’s time in Tulsa had been spent being driven from political meeting to meeting, I had no trouble knowing just where to go. My parents’ house was an impressive one in a very nice part of town. My father, I realized, was an executive with a medium-sized oil drilling company, so life for the Stewart family was very comfortable.

Mom and dad met us at the door, mom smothering me with a loving hug while dad shook hands with Chip. I felt as if I had known them all my life, and in a sense, I suppose I had. I was undeniably their daughter, sharing with them the fair skin and brown hair of a Scottish-

English heritage.

"How are things at Oklahoma State?" mom asked.

"Great," I replied, hoping she hadn't noted my surprise. I looked over at the car, then back at her. The Capta College decal on the rear window of my Toyota now read Oklahoma State in orange and white letters.

I heard a scuttling noise punctuated by panting as a clumsy black dog rushed across the marble tile entryway to greet me. "Hello, Boomer!" I cried, squatting down on the floor to greet the dog I remembered living with since seventh grade. Conrad cringed a little inside me as I remembered he had a terrible allergy to pets.

"Honey, why don't you show Chip to the guest room?" my mother asked. I hoped that neither of my parents saw the look Chip and I gave each other. The look stated without any words that we'd far rather be sharing a room, but it was my parents' house after all. With a subtle grin, I motioned for Chip to follow me.

We had enough time in the guest room for a hug that was as much for our triumph as it was for our affection for each other. "I can't believe it!" Chip marvelled. "We were actually allowed to leave Ovid."

"Why not?" I asked, hugging him tighter. "The gods have no idea we remember who we were."

Chip released me. "Do you think we should go to the authorities?"

I shrugged. "And tell them what? Tell them that we escaped from a town run by Roman gods after we had been changed into other people?"

"But the town is really there," he insisted. "We could take them to it."

"I'm not sure we could," I told him. "Sure, I know the way back, but I'll bet if we took anybody back there who didn't belong there, Ovid wouldn't be there."

"But it has to be there!" Chip argued.

I shook my head. "Don't be so sure. You know what my mom just

asked me? She asked how things were going at Oklahoma State. That's where they think we go to school. And after she asked, I looked over at my car. You know the Capta College parking sticker on my windshield? It now reads 'Oklahoma State.' So does the decal on the rear window."

"Good God!"

"Or gods," I amended. We didn't speak of telling the authorities again.

We had a great time with my parents that weekend. They treated him as part of the family. And why not? Chip was the age of one of my older sisters, so they could relate to him pretty well. I think Chip had a good time as well. He had never gotten up the nerve to try to leave Ovid before. Of course, his new life as Chip hadn't included a family like mine. The aunt who had supposedly raised him was dead and he wasn't close to his cousins in Oklahoma City. I guess he just never had a good reason to leave Ovid before I came along.

"I've got a theory about you and your family," Chip told me as we started our drive back to Ovid at the end of the weekend.

"You mean as to why they have no idea where we're really going to school?"

"Partially," he replied. "Did you look around the house much?"

"Sure," I told him. "It brought back a lot of old memories."

"Such as your best friend in sixth grade?"

I thought for a moment and realized I really couldn't recall much about sixth grade.

"Or the first boy you ever dated?"

"Oh that was..." What was his name anyway?

"How about the first boy you made love to?"

"That's not a nice question."

"Do you remember?" he pressed.

"Yeah," I sighed. "His name was Randy Etkin. I met him right after I

graduated from high school.”

“In other words, right after you were transformed.”

I saw where he was going with all of this. Details of my life after my transformation were understandably sharp. However, details of growing up were on an ‘as needed’ basis. Family I tended to remember. After all, I’d be meeting with them and talking about family matters. As for who my best friend was in the sixth grade... I had no memories of that, nor was I likely to need them. I might never see her again. I mentioned this to Chip.

“And yet there are pictures of you at that age.” He reached inside his coat. “I brought one along. I found it in the drawer in the guest room.”

I glanced at the picture as I drove. There were three girls in the picture, each grinning in their swimsuits showing off undeveloped bodies looking to be somewhere between ten and twelve. One was recognizably me. As for the other two... “That’s Dina Becker and Sarah Driscoll. They were my two best friends in...” My voice trailed off.

“In sixth grade, right?”

He sounded so damned sure of himself. “Yeah, right. So I guess I just forgot their names for a minute.”

“Or you just remembered them because you needed them,” he amended. “Don’t you see what’s going on here?”

I’d had enough. I pulled off into the parking lot of a convenience store. “Okay, Chip. What are you getting at?”

“The gods need people from out of town to attend Capta. It wouldn’t look natural if all the students were from Ovid,” he explained.

“So what does that say about me?” I wanted to know.

“April, my guess is that there really is—or was—an April Stewart. There’s too much evidence in that house for it to be otherwise. I know the gods could create it. If they can create an entire town, this would be nothing to them. But I think they took an easier path with you. Why

not give you the identity of someone who was real?”

“But where is the real April Stewart now?” I asked. A dark part of my mind came up with an answer. I shivered. “Oh.”

Chip put his hand on my trembling arm. “I’m not saying it was definitely that way.”

I nodded, feeling the sting of tears. “I know.”

But it made sense. The gods needed outsiders—as college students and probably other identities. Why not look for the type of people they needed among those they couldn’t or wouldn’t save? A young man falling asleep at the wheel on a long, lonely road. A young woman living alone who tripped and hit her head on the edge of a sharp cabinet. A young high school girl, just graduated, who went to the wrong party on the wrong night and met the wrong man...

I shuddered.

“April, what is it?”

“Nothing,” I lied, remembering for the moment the party out at an old deserted farmhouse. I remembered there was a lot of drinking going on—drinking and more. I remembered the guy—big, strong, not one of the guys I had gone to school with. I remembered flirting with him, going into the woods with him, the feeling of panic as he pulled off my skirt. I told him no...

“Oh God!”

Chip held me close. “Block it out, April. It wasn’t really you. It was the other April—the one you replaced.”

“She’s dead, Chip!” I cried, burying my face in his chest.

“I know,” he said as he gently stroked my hair. “I’m sorry, April, but I know.”

Although we had travelled to Tulsa in my car, Chip drove the rest of the way back to Ovid. I was too upset to even think about staying behind the wheel. I was dead. No, that wasn’t right; I was alive. But April Stewart—the real April Stewart was dead. I couldn’t exactly see

her death (thank God) but I could feel it, lurking in the aftermath of an ill-fated party.

What had happened to the real April, I wondered? Was her undiscovered body still out there in the woods somewhere? I doubted that, really. After all, The Judge wouldn't want an unexplained duplicate of April Stewart, alive or dead. No, he must have known of the real April's death and rushed me in as a replacement. I would have bet a lot of money that the real April died within hours of my transformation.

But how had he known that I wouldn't remember being another person? As I had already seen, some of The Judge's victims remembered their previous lives and others didn't. He must have been pretty certain that I would forget who I had been and settle into my new identity at once.

As I rode in silence, I began to see something strangely generous in The Judge's actions. My parents hadn't suffered the loss of a daughter. My family—my new family—was whole. But why was I chosen to take her place? Corey told us that The Judge lured people to Ovid and changed them for his own purposes. I believed that. I had thought that he and his cohorts had forced our plane down. But what if that wasn't the case? What if our plane was supposed to crash and he prevented it?

That line of thought led to a number of new questions. If he could prevent my death, why not leave me as I was? I could have done some good for the state—for the nation—as I had been. I would have surely been governor and maybe even achieved national office. Instead, The Judge had used me to replace a young girl who was by all standards of measure I could think of, less important to the scheme of things than Conrad Williams. April—I—was a mediocre student, boy-crazy, frivolous, and immature. Conrad Williams was intelligent, forceful, mature and focused.

For that matter, why hadn't The Judge saved April's life if she was so important? Why had he allowed her to die and her killer go free? It was enough to make my head spin.

I put those thoughts away as Ovid appeared over the hill. "So you found the way back to Ovid," I said to Chip.

"Not really," he replied, slowing down as we approached the city limits. "I just sort of let myself go, as if I was flying on autopilot. The next thing I know, there's Ovid. The funny thing is I could never explain to anyone exactly how we got here."

Chip pulled into the parking lot at the sorority house. "But how are you going to get home?" I asked him as I fussed with getting my shoes back on.

He shrugged. "I'll walk. It's not far."

"But it's dark," I pointed out. "And it's getting colder." That was an understatement. The last light of day had displayed a leaden sky that hinted at one of Oklahoma's famous sleet storms.

"Don't worry," he assured me with a smile. "I'll be fine. Now, how about you? Are you going to be okay?"

"I...I think so," I answered softly. "I just keep thinking about her..."

"You don't know that's what happened."

"Yes I do," I told him. I couldn't explain how exactly, but I knew.

Just then, he took me in his arms and kissed me gently. "April, no matter how or why it happened, I'm glad you're you."

I managed to give him a small smile before rushing off to the house before I could hold back the tears no longer.

Inside the house, I was forced to keep from crying just a little longer. Myra spotted me from the dining room where she was studying. "Hey April! Some woman named June has been trying to call you all evening. She said to call her whenever you got in. She didn't leave a number, though."

Of course I had the number, but I didn't want to call it. There was no June. It was a code word between Corey and me and it meant something urgent was going on. I located a reasonably private house phone and called her.

“Where have you been?”

Those were her first words and they irritated me. “I told you I’d be in Tulsa for the weekend.”

“And I told you it was a bad idea, particularly taking Chip with you. What if you’d had a problem getting out of Ovid?”

“Look, Corey, Thanksgiving isn’t very far off and I’d have to leave town then. It would seem a little odd for me to spend the holiday here when my parents were so close. Besides, there was no problem.” I didn’t tell her what I had learned. Maybe I would later, but for now I was royally pissed with her attitude.

Corey must have figured that out, for she backed down at once.

“Okay, you’re right. No harm was done. The reason I called is we know when you’ll have access to the system for at least three hours from one to about four.”

I felt as if my heart had stopped. Tapping into Betty Vest’s computer was the furthest thing from my mind at that moment. “When?” I asked, hoping I’d have plenty of time to steel myself for the task.

“Day after tomorrow,” she replied, dashing my hopes. “You need to put everything you can on a CD. Have you got a blank one?”

“Yes.”

“Then good luck, April. Be ready.”

I heard the click as she hung up. It was really going to happen! All right, I told myself. I’ll do it. I agreed to do it and I would. But after I had given Corey the CD, I wanted out. I wanted the chance to be left alone to live my new life as best I could. Corey and Nancy and even Chip could continue if they wanted to, but I just wanted to be April Stewart for now and for always.

I was thankful that I didn’t have to be at work again until the appointed time for my betrayal. I didn’t think I could look Betty Vest or Brenda in the eye for very long without losing my resolve. Both of them had been wonderful to me and I was about to let them down. So I spent the next day sleepwalking through my classes. Even Professor Wheeler

seemed a little disappointed in my performance and held me after class.

“Is there something, wrong, Ms. Stewart? You didn’t seem to be very involved in class today. That isn’t like you.” He could have added “recently” but he didn’t.

“I’m sorry, Professor,” I sighed. “I guess I just feel a little out of sorts today.”

I’m sure from the way I said it that he assumed I meant I was having my period. That was the only good thing about the monthly visitor—it made a terrific excuse. He looked a little embarrassed and abruptly changed the subject.

“I understand you’ve been working part time…” he began.

“Yes?” I replied cautiously. Was he working with the gods? Was there something that he suspected?

“If you need a job, I was wondering if you would be interested in doing some work for me next semester,” he ventured, causing my whole body to relax. I hoped he didn’t notice.

“What kind of work?” I asked, curious as to why he bothered to approach me about it.

“Oh the usual for a professor,” he chuckled. “I’m writing a new textbook. Well, actually updating the one we use here. I could use an administrative assistant to help me get it organized. I’ll clear it with Betty if you’d like.”

“But… wouldn’t you rather use a political science major for that?” I asked. “Surely many of them would jump at the chance to help you.”

His eyes narrowed and a thin smile crossed his lips. “Ms. Stewart, you seem to know more about the realities of political science than most graduate students would. These past few weeks you have blossomed from an average—no, below average—student into my star pupil. You have an understanding of the workings of government that would elude even career bureaucrats. Have you given any more thought to changing your major?”

In fact, I had thought about it. The new me wasn't cut out to be an English major. Even the old April had never intended to do anything with an English degree. She—I—was just majoring in English because the rules said you had to major in something. My real major had been personal social activities.

Political science, on the other hand, was interesting since I had already walked the walk in a previous life. With a major in political science, I could go on to law school or maybe get a graduate degree in the subject and teach it at the college level. Or maybe I could run for office again. As I left Congress, there were more and more women elected all the time. Of course, I'd have to move away from Ovid since the rest of the world seemed to have no idea it even existed. I wasn't even sure if that would be possible, but it was an idea.

"I'd like to change majors," I told him honestly, "but I'm already a junior. I wouldn't have much time to take all the required courses."

He smiled. "Let me look into it for you. Both majors are in the same school so I imagine your English courses can be moved over as electives and you can concentrate on courses in your new major for the remainder of your time here. With your abilities, I'd have no problems waiving prerequisites to get you into the advanced courses you'd need."

We discussed the change of majors for a few more minutes, and when we had finished, not only had I agreed to change majors but I had accepted the job as his research assistant for the following semester. After all, the job in Betty Vest's office was only good through the end of the semester, so I'd need something for the spring term. The more I thought about it, the happier with my situation I became. I even managed to come out of my funk over what I would be required to do at work the next day.

My elation didn't last long, though. The day of my betrayal came at last. I began to realize as I made my way to Betty Vest's office that if I was caught raiding her computer, there would be no change of majors, no research assistant's job, and quite possibly, no April Stewart.

Brenda was at her desk as I entered the office. She was straightening a small stack of file folders on her desk as I came in. "Oh, April, thank God you're on time today," the shade greeted me.

"Why's that?" I asked as innocently as I could.

"Betty had to go to a meeting with the Provost. She won't be back until at least four and Purchasing needs me to go over some PO's with them right now or we won't get some equipment we need on time," Brenda informed me. "I know it's short notice, but can you handle the office for a while? This shouldn't take too long."

When Corey got Brenda in her clutches. I figured it would take considerably longer than Brenda assumed. Corey had done her part and had cleared the way for me. There was no turning back now. Oh how I wished I had never ever gotten mixed up in all of this!

"I'll be fine," I assured her, sounding much more calm than I really felt. "Don't worry." She gave me a parting smile and hustled off in the direction of Corey's office. I was alone. Hurriedly, I shut and locked the office door. It was unusual but not unheard of for the door to be locked. Unlike a major university with its vast staffs, Capta College was small enough that no one would be suspicious. Everyone would just assume that the small staff the president employed was occupied elsewhere. The phones were the same way. I transferred the line to voice mail and made my way into Betty's office.

I won't say I wasn't nervous as I sat behind her desk and turned on her terminal as Nancy had shown me. I had the password, of course, but what if it was wrong? What if this was a trap? I was about to steal information from beings whose power I could scarcely imagine. What they would probably do to me would not be pretty.

As the prompt came up, I carefully typed in H-E-A-R-T-H. I breathed a sigh of heartfelt relief when the screen flashed "Opening Files. Please Wait." Several file folders appeared on the screen. Some were standard college folders which Nancy had taught me to identify. There were about half a dozen, though, which weren't familiar. I cursed to myself hoping I could find the important ones quickly so I could

download what I needed and get out.

There was a likely candidate, I thought. The folder was labelled 'Delphi.' I remembered from my readings that the gods often consulted the Oracle of Delphi. It was worth a shot. I just hoped no additional passwords would be required. From what Corey had told us, the gods might have incredible powers, but they had limited computer skills. I suppose since computers tended to become more inaccessible for those who hadn't grown up with them, the gods must be the most out of touch computer operators on the planet. I seriously doubted if they would burden themselves with multiple passwords.

To my relief, the folder opened with no problems. I quickly looked over the myriad of files and told the computer to download all of them to my CD. The system complied, and I watched with satisfaction as file after file was transferred.

Now, I had time on my hands. I had noticed another file on the screen called 'Residents.' I wondered as I waited for the extensive download to complete exactly what was in that file. Personnel records on all of us who had been transformed, I guessed, and when I brought up the file, I found I was correct. Curiosity got the best of me. I realized I would never have an opportunity like this again. Just for the fun of it, I brought up the folder, finding it activated a database and a prompt. I began by typing in Chip's name.

On the screen, two pictures appeared. One was of the Chip I had come to know and care for and the other a picture of a nice-looking black man. In a column underneath the black's picture was a brief description of the life of Abdul Mohammed Washington, or Flip as he was otherwise known. There was nothing in the bio that Chip hadn't already discussed with me, but it was interesting to know Flip had been cute, too. He was quite a good football player and I know I would have noticed him if the memory of his very existence hadn't been erased by the gods.

Next, I looked myself up. Funny, in my memories I was better looking than the picture of Conrad Williams that came up on the screen. I guess my Conrad side was blessed with a good self-image that my

April side didn't buy. He—I—was attractive in a fatherly sort of way. I suppose that wasn't really a bad attribute for a politician. I could certainly remember being Conrad, but it was a little hard to think that the slightly paunchy, graying man in the picture had been me. I looked at the picture of April Stewart and then again at Conrad's picture. Well, The Judge may have screwed Nancy and Corey, but he did all right by me. Maybe if I had known from the beginning who I had been before, I might have thought differently, but two years of being a girl without knowledge of my previous life made my April identity feel natural and my Conrad identity like some sort of a dream life.

I looked at the CD. It was still churning away. I realized I hadn't bothered to see how large the Delphi folder was. I hoped it wasn't so gigantic that the CD couldn't hold it. Maybe I should have checked first. Oh well. There was no going back now. As long as I had the time, I continued to look through the Residents file.

Nancy was next, and I was surprised to see she had not only been a man but a black man. I wondered if Chip was aware that Nancy had been a soul brother. Probably not or he would have mentioned it. She—then a he—had been an outstanding surgeon according to the record. A Johns Hopkins education, complete with residency at the hospital there followed by fifteen years at the UMKC Medical Center in Kansas City had garnered Dr. Andrew Mitchell (Nancy's former name) the deep respect of the medical community. Apparently, though, Dr. Mitchell had never found time for a family. He had been divorced after a brief early marriage and never remarried. No wonder as Nancy she had come to value the family she had never enjoyed before, even though she chaffed at the cost.

That just left Corey. When her record appeared on the screen, I at first thought I had made a mistake. Hadn't Corey told us she had been a businessman? The picture on the screen next to the one of Corey showed a woman—blonde and probably not unattractive in her youth, but that had been some years before. The forty-something year old woman in the picture had a hard edge, as if she had taken on the world and lost. But it was the biography below the picture which

alarmed me the most. It read like a police blotter—charge after charge of what seemed like every possible non-lethal crime. There were few convictions and those were typically on minor charges, but the whole bio told the story of a woman who might have been one of the biggest con artists in the Midwest.

Con artist! My God, we were all following a woman who had lied and cheated her way through all of her adult life. We believed in her. We were risking our very necks for her. And for what? Was this just another con? Were there really other cells? Was she really working against the gods?

I looked down at the CD which had stopped spinning. What was on that disk that I had downloaded for her? I had to know. I was about to put something in her hands that she could use against the creators of Ovid. I wasn't sure she was entitled to such power. In fact, I was pretty sure she wasn't entitled to it at all.

But what if there were other cells? What if Corey actually was a part of a larger plan? How could I keep the CD from her? For that matter, I didn't even know what was on the disk. Maybe my fears were over nothing. Perhaps I had guessed wrong and the Delphi files were nothing more than recipes for nectar of the gods or something equally innocent. I had to know.

Nervously, I opened the folder surprised to find that it held only one file labelled 'CONFLG.' At least I wouldn't have to paw my way through endless files. I clicked the file icon and waited. I didn't have to wait long. What appeared on the screen was like watching CNN speeded up. Images flashed on the screen too quickly for me to follow, but subliminally, I was able to recognize a few of the pictures as they flashed by. Perhaps it was Conrad's political and military background which helped but the images seemed to make sense in a strange sort of way.

I suddenly noticed the Pause key on my keyboard and hit it to stop the images from flashing past. What remained on the screen was something that at first I thought was an image of Hiroshima. It was a city devastated by a nuclear explosion. But closer examination of the

image showed something even more frightening than an image of the past. I could tell from the architecture of the skeletal burned steel that remained of the buildings that these had once been high-rises in what I suspected was an American city. I wasn't sure which city but that didn't matter. What mattered was that it was not something out of a Hollywood special effects lab; it was a photograph in full color.

I started punching keys to make the images move again. The Enter key did the trick, but while I had hoped to see just the next picture, the images began flashing past me once again. I thought I saw the image of a friend of mine from Congress, but it couldn't have been him. He was even younger than I was but the quick image showed a much older man.

By the time I was able to hit the Pause key again, the image showed a force of armored vehicles—American from their markings—sweeping across a desolate landscape. The vehicles were like nothing I had ever seen before and yet once again they were obviously real. But how...?

I was dealing with gods, I reminded myself, and gods consulted the Oracle of Delphi to learn the future. That was what I was viewing—the future.

I allowed the images to speed by again, stopping them as quickly as I could. This time I saw a city I didn't recognize, but I could see the minarets of a large mosque dominating part of the city. Overhead was a bright sun—brighter than I could imagine in even the Middle East. I was certain it was the Middle East, but while I had been there both as a soldier and a politician, I couldn't be certain of which city it was. Damascus? Mecca? Teheran? Baghdad? I didn't know.

As I looked at the image, I became aware that the bright object was not a sun at all. It was the beginning of a huge explosion. Already buildings nearest to it were swaying unnaturally as if they were about to disintegrate. It was the air burst of a thermonuclear weapon. For once, I was happy I couldn't tune finely enough to see the next few pictures. I was certain that they would show me the charred ruins of another city.

Morbid curiosity urged me to push on, but a sudden thud in the outer hall reminded me that I had no right to be viewing these images. Betty or Brenda or even someone else could be out there right now. I quickly removed the CD and slipped it in its jewel case, but it was too late. The door to Betty's office was opening.

"April?"

It was Corey! At first, I breathed a sigh of relief. I had half-expected Betty Vest or Brenda to open the door catching me in the act of stealing secrets from the computer. The thought of being discovered by a goddess with all her power was not a happy one. I hadn't realized Corey had a key. Then I remembered what I had discovered about Corey. She had lied to us; she didn't deserve the disk. But how could I keep it from her? We were both female, but in a fight, I suspected Corey would win. She appeared to have both size and strength on me.

"Oh good," she remarked, "you're finished."

How had she known that? I had quickly closed the file I had been watching so she couldn't see it. Then I realized there was still a message on the screen announcing that the file had been successfully downloaded to the CD. "Uh... I'm not finished yet," I protested.

"Nonsense," she replied, slipping past me and removing the CD. She carefully placed it in a jewel case and stuffed it in her purse. "I'm sure you've got enough. You've done well, April."

No I hadn't. I had given away important information to a woman I no longer trusted. I thought about wresting the disk from her, but that was Conrad talking. As April, I was much smaller and weaker than my male self. Corey had height and weight over me and could have taken me easily. Even my fighting skills I had learned in the military would not help me. I had never tried to use them in this female form and doubted it I would have the strength to make any of it work right.

"What will you do with the CD?" I asked, trying not to sound suspicious.

She shrugged. "That's up to a vote of the cell leaders. We'll see what's

on the disk and if it's good enough, we'll use it to make Jupiter release all of us. You'd like that wouldn't you, April?"

"Oh, of course," I lied glibly. Hearing Corey's lies made it easier to return them. "But I thought you were with Brenda."

"I was," she told me. "But as we were finishing, Brenda got a call from the Health Center telling her that her child was sick."

Obviously Nancy made the call. "How did you manage to make her child sick?"

"Oh, we didn't," she laughed. "When Brenda gets over there, she'll find out it was all a mix-up. She'll probably be back here in another half hour or so, so you'd better get out of here. Make sure nothing was disturbed."

The room looked fine, but I was disturbed.

"Can you imagine?" Corey chuckled. "That shade actually thinks she has a little girl."

"She does. I've seen pictures of her."

"Well of course you have, but you realize it's all an illusion, don't you? It isn't as if they were real people."

There was a time when I would have believed that, but I had come to know a number of shades—my roommate, some of my professors, other students, including some of my other sorority sisters, and, of course, Brenda. I had found them to be just people. I wondered sadly what happened to them when we replaced them. In any case, Corey was starting to show her true colors. Whatever she had planned didn't involve the good of her cell or any other cells—if there really were any. Whatever she had planned was going to be only good for Corey.

"Better hurry, April," she said with a smile, and left with a look of smug satisfaction on her face. If I was going to do anything, it would have to be quickly. I didn't expect Corey to wait long to make her move.

But I was stuck there in the office until Brenda got back. I'd have to call for help right away. I thought about making an anonymous call to

The Judge's office, but he'd find out eventually what had happened. Besides, whatever the motives of the gods, they had to be better than Corey's. I was beginning to regret not fighting her for the disk.

"The Judge's office," a pleasant voice announced. "This is Mrs. Patton. Can I help you?"

"I need to speak to The Judge."

"I'm sorry, he's left for the day. Can I help you?"

Oh no! I had to talk to him. "This is an emergency!" I blurted out, near tears.

"Well... maybe I should connect you with Officer Mercer."

Officer Mercer. He was really Mercury, of course, but more importantly, he represented the police in Ovid. What would he do with me when he discovered what I had done? His manner was so crisp—almost cold—that I was reluctant to trust my story with him. But what choice did I have? Every minute Corey had that disk was a minute more for her to hatch her plan. "All right," I agreed, a quaver in my voice. "Let me talk to him."

I didn't even hear the phone ring. Instantly, a voice announced, "Officer Mercer."

I must have sounded like an absolute ditz. In a matter of seconds, I had confessed to breaking into the gods' computer system and stealing information. I managed to implicate Corey, Chip and Nancy as well. As they might have said in the old crime movies, I sang like a canary.

"When did you give Ms. McGregor the CD?"

I jumped at the question, for it hadn't come from the phone; it came from behind me. My heart pounding from the shock, I turned to see Officer Mercer standing behind me. His face was impassive and his mirrored sunglasses hid whatever expression his eyes might have held. I was suddenly reminded of my first and only meeting with him the day I had been transformed. It was an uncomfortable memory to say the least.

“Uh... about half an hour ago. You can still catch her before she can use it against you.”

I thought I actually saw a small smile cross his lips, but maybe I was mistaken. “She can’t do us any harm with the disk. Transmission by computer is strictly monitored since a... breach occurred a few months ago.”

“But she must have some way of getting the information out of Ovid,” I pointed out, frustrated nearly to the point of tears. “You aren’t taking this very seriously.”

Still unperturbed, he replied, “Oh, we’re taking it very seriously.”

“April! Officer Mercer! What’s going on here?”

I didn’t even have to turn to recognize the voice of Betty Vest. I turned toward her but my eyes were downcast in embarrassment for having betrayed her trust in me. “I’ve done something awful,” I told her as the tears finally began to flow. Briefly, through the tears, I explained what I had done, finishing with, “I’m so sorry. I’ve been a fool. I’ve betrayed you and Jupiter and...”

“What did you just say?” Betty interrupted, alarm in her voice.

“I said I had betrayed you,” I managed to say again through the tears.

She was standing directly over me now, a strangely confused expression on her patrician face. “No, I mean about Jupiter.”

“Jupiter?” I repeated meekly. “The Judge!”

I looked from her startled face to Officer Mercer. Even his impassive countenance seemed shaken, and I almost imagined I could see his hidden eyes become suddenly wider.

“How... how can you say his name like that?” Betty demanded. Her hands were on my arms, shaking me gently. “You are one of the Children of Lethe...”

“Lethe?” I asked nervously.

“The River of Forgetfulness,” Officer Mercer supplied.

Betty's grip on my arms turned to a more motherly caress. "I'm sorry to alarm you, dear, but you've startled me. You've startled us all." She looked up at Officer Mercer. "This makes things worse."

Officer Mercer nodded and left. Well, he didn't exactly leave. Instead, his body seemed to blur and streak toward the open door. He was gone from sight in less than the blink of an eye.

"What's happening?" I asked.

Betty thought for a moment, as if deciding how much to tell me. At last, she replied, "We have to be careful to protect our existence here in Ovid. As you have probably found out, the outside world knows nothing of us and can't for many years if we are to succeed. Those who remember their previous lives after their transformations are not allowed to leave Ovid until they have earned our complete trust. For the rest, it doesn't really matter. Their origins in Ovid are hidden when they leave."

I thought about my parents. They thought I went to school at Oklahoma State in Stillwater. As April, I must have thought so, too, whenever I had visited them—at least until the last trip I had made.

"Then Corey can leave Ovid," I suddenly realized. "She's like me—she remembers everything."

Betty nodded. "Yes, and like you, she can find her way back here—with others if she chooses. Once they have viewed your CD, they will have no choice but to believe her story."

"But... but... you're gods. Can't you stop her? Can't you just go where she is and... do whatever it takes to keep your secret?"

"No, dear. We aren't omnipotent," she explained ruefully. "And to make matters worse, our powers beyond Ovid are limited. We will do everything we can to find her and stop her from whatever she has planned, though."

"What... what happens if you can't find her?" I asked meekly.

There was sorrow in Betty's eyes. "Then, my dear, the world may come to an end a little faster."

Betty's words were still running through my mind the next morning when I awakened in my own bed. I had halfway expected to be hauled off to some secret dungeon beneath City Hall. Of course there was no such thing, but my imagination had been fueled by the guilt I felt for my part in allowing Corey to get away. If such a dungeon had really existed, I would have probably deserved to be chained to the wall there.

It was hard to imagine as I woke up on such a bright, crisp late fall morning to the morning laughter of my sorority sisters that the end of the world might be near. It was even harder to imagine that my actions might have brought it even closer. Like many who had served in Congress or the military or both, I believed that once the threshold of nuclear destruction had been crossed, there would be no going back. The images of the Oracle indicated as much. I realized now that the gods must have found a way to prevent that future from occurring. How they planned to do it, I had no idea, but my actions had really botched their efforts up. I was certain of that.

Before I could continue to feel sorry for myself, Myra ducked in my room. "April, there's a call for you on the house phone. It's Cindy Patton at The Judge's office." I could tell from the look in her eyes and the tone of her voice that she knew very well the gravity of such a call, even if she didn't know the content.

I jumped up adjusting my pajama tops from where they had twisted under my breasts. "Thanks, Myra."

Mrs. Patton's voice was even but I could hear a thread of tension in it. "April, The Judge wants to see you in his courtroom at ten this morning."

"But I have a class..." I protested weakly. Class or not, I found myself honestly frightened that I would have to see The Judge. I began to wish that I had called Chip and Nancy the previous night. Perhaps they could have given me some moral support. After all, even though they weren't aware of it, they had been duped by Corey as well. But I had been too embarrassed and too upset to call either of them. In fact, I had even refused a worried call from Chip.

“Cut it,” Mrs. Patton replied sharply. “I think you know how important this is.”

“I’ll be there,” I agreed softly. As if I had a choice.

I walked cautiously into the courtroom tugging at my skirt. Why had I chosen to wear such a short one? Then I remembered ruefully that it was about the same length as the one I was wearing after I had been transformed. If I had had all of my memories that day, I would have been horrified suddenly to find myself standing there in a short skirt. Now, I just hoped I’d still be wearing it when I left. There were rumors that not everyone who entered The Judge’s courtroom left as a human.

Others had arrived before me, I saw. Standing at the bar were Susan Jager who had been our attorney on that fateful date over two years before and a blonde I remembered being in the gallery that day.

“April!” the blonde called out. I could tell from her voice who she was. “I’m Cindy Patton.” She walked to my side and put her hand on my arm. “Are you all right? You look as white as a ghost.”

“I...” My voice just trailed off. I was too nervous to deny how nervous I felt.

“The Judge asked me to bring you into his chambers as soon as you arrived,” she explained, guiding me to a door at the back of the courtroom.

“What... what’s he going to do to me?”

“He just wants to ask you some questions,” she explained gently. “Just tell him the whole truth and I’m sure things will be all right.” The problem is her tone didn’t sound as sure as her words.

She and my attorney followed me into The Judge’s chambers. I wondered if they were actually there to make sure I didn’t bolt. Honestly, I thought about it, but I knew I had nowhere to run. The gods controlled every inch of Ovid, and I was reasonably certain that my ability to leave the town had somehow been curtailed.

The Judge was leaning back in a large green leather chair behind a

huge oak desk. He was an imposing figure, and I felt my knees tremble when I looked into his stern eyes. Even the gold-rimmed glasses didn't soften the piercing stare. "Miss Stewart. Please find a seat."

It was then that I noticed that two of the green leather high-backed chairs were occupied. It was with no little relief that I saw Nancy and Chip both sitting there calmly holding mugs of steaming coffee. Hail, hail, the gang's all here—except for Corey, of course.

Careful not to allow my already-short skirt to hike even higher, I slipped into a chair next to Chip. I was comforted by the reassuring smile he gave me. Cindy Patton even asked me if I wanted coffee, but I whispered no. I was still so nervous I knew a cup of coffee would land me in the restroom in minutes.

"Now that we're all here, let's begin," the Judge ordered. "Miss Stewart, I'm most interested in hearing your story. Please tell us what has been happening these last few weeks."

"Where do you want me to begin?" I asked nervously.

The Judge spread his hands. "You might as well start at the point where you remembered your life as Conrad Williams."

It took an hour. I could have probably done it in less, but I realized I was on trial even if I wasn't in the courtroom. That caused me to be cautious. The Judge also asked a number of questions. It became apparent to me that Corey had been correct—the gods had no idea that memories thought lost could be recovered as our little cell had proven.

When I had finished, The Judge turned to Nancy. Her story was shorter since she had had far less to do with extracting the data from the Oracle. The Judge waited to the very end to ask his questions of her.

"And so, Mrs. Franklin, you joined the cell and helped Ms. McGregor in the hope of being returned to your former life?"

"Yes," Nancy replied softly.

“And is that still your wish?”

“I... I don't think so,” she answered to my surprise. “When this all began, I guess that's what I wanted. I wanted to be a man again—any man even if it wasn't a black man. But I've come to love my family, Your Honor. It's just that...”

“Yes?” The Judge prompted.

“I feel so useless,” she explained. “Your Honor, I'm—or I was—a doctor. Memories of being a doctor have been returned to me. I need to practice medicine again. I can be... an asset to the community.”

“But what if that meant you'd lose your family?” The Judge asked.

Nancy looked blankly at him. “Is that my choice?”

“Our current doctors are all men,” he pointed out.

Nancy thought for a moment, and I knew whatever she said next would be painful to her. At last, she announced, “If that's my choice, then I choose keeping my family.” There was pain in her eyes, but I think sitting there with the realization of all her family meant to her had caused her to reorder her priorities. Even at that, it had not been an easy choice for her.

The Judge just nodded and turned to Chip.

Chip's interrogation was quick and to the point. He backed up everything Nancy and I had said and provided his own reasons for helping Corey. The Judge didn't seem too surprised.

“I gather then that you're content to be who we have made of you,” The Judge surmised.

“Yes I am,” Chip agreed. Then he turned to me. “As long as I have April.”

The Judge rose. “Then it's time for the final act in this little play. If you will accompany Ms. Jager and Ms. Patton into the courtroom, we can resolve this situation as quickly as possible.”

I didn't really know what was coming. I'm sure none of us did, for as

we entered the courtroom, we let out a collective gasp. There, standing before the bar with Officer Mercer next to her was Corey McGregor. She had a smug smile on her face as she saw us. At first, I thought Officer Mercer had captured her, but the smile told me this was somehow all part of her plan.

“Ms. McGregor, how nice to see you again,” The Judge said. There was no sarcasm in his voice, and if I hadn’t known the situation, I would have thought he was greeting an old friend. It was probably the right thing to say, though. It surprised Corey so much that the smile slipped just a little.

Mrs. Patton ushered Nancy, Chip and I into the gallery while Susan Jager took her post at the defendant’s table.

“I won’t be needing your pet lawyer today, Judge,” Corey growled, bringing a red flush to the attorney’s face. “I’m not the one on trial today.”

The Judge had donned his black robes of office and stood at the bench, making no move to sit. If Corey had expected to disturb him with her rudeness, she must have been surprised. The Judge merely shrugged and stepped around the bench to face his adversary. “If you will,” he replied with dignity. “What is it you want?”

Corey nodded. “I like that—right to the point. You know I have the CD that April over there made for me.”

The Judge smiled. “Of course. And I would imagine that you have already made certain that there is no way we can just retrieve it from you.”

“That’s right,” she agreed. “Five copies of the disk will be expressed to five news organizations today. Unless you agree to my demands, the whole world will know about what’s on it by this evening. You were a fool to make it available in a standard readable format.”

The Judge’s staff winced when she called him a fool. I nearly did myself. She might have some leverage over him, but I wondered if she truly understood who she was dealing with. Although The Judge’s

smile didn't waiver, I was certain that he was filing the comment away for future reference.

"And again I ask: what is it you want?" he queried evenly.

"Change me back to who I was," she demanded. The Judge shook his head. "You know I can't do that. Your old life is gone. No one even remembers Vanessa Bradshaw."

There was a gasp next to me from Nancy. Of course, I realized. She didn't know Corey had never been a man. That was just Corey's way of gaining Nancy's trust.

"You would have died from that beating," The Judge continued. "It wasn't very smart of you to try to con the mob. If Officer Mercer hadn't found you in that ditch..."

"Damn Officer Mercer!" she yelled. "You knew it was going to happen. You let it happen. You let them beat me and then instead of fixing my body, you threw me into the body of this nigger!"

Chip and Nancy both gasped at that. So there was another reason Corey had lied about her previous life. She had been—and still was—a bigot. It was poetic justice for her to be in the body of a black woman, but it explained why she was so anxious to be transformed out of it.

"So if you can't be your original self, you want to be someone else," The Judge surmised.

"Damned straight I do!" she snarled. "And that's just for starters. I want fifty million dollars transferred to the offshore account I had before I came here. And I want your word that you'll leave me alone."

"And what do we get in return?" The Judge asked calmly.

She smiled a sly smile. "You'll get the names and locations of the recipients of the five CD's. What you do to get them back is your business."

The Judge shrugged. "Agreed."

"Agreed? Just like that?" Corey asked, surprised.

“It’s a small price to pay,” The Judge informed her. “You can confirm the transfer of the money from my office. Now, do you have any certain identity you would like me to create for you?”

It was Corey’s turn to shrug. “I don’t care as long as I’m in my mid twenties, attractive, healthy, and white. That’s white—you got that part?”

“Female?”

“Of course,” she replied. “Oh, and none of your tricks. I want my entire memory this time.”

“Oh you’ll have it,” The Judge assured her. “Second transformations always leave memories intact. They lack the trauma of first transformations you see. Are you ready now? If so, picture who you would like to be in your mind. We’ll provide the rest.”

I shivered as I heard him utter those strange Latin-sounding words again. It was a memory of my own transformation. But nothing happened to me. Instead, I watched as Corey’s body seemed to brighten until it nearly glowed. Her skin began to turn lighter and her hair lengthened a bit, changing in color to a spun gold shade. Corey had been a little matronly on top, but now her body was as trim as a model’s. Even her clothing changed. The gray women’s suit she had been wearing changed into a winter white dress, complete with all the appropriate accessories.

“Observe,” The Judge said, the air in front of the new Corey shimmering until she could see her reflection in it.

Corey put a pale, slender hand to her cheek, as if to make sure what she saw was real. “It’s perfect,” she murmured. I could imagine the wheels inside her head turning as she realized how she now had the face and figure to con any man right out of his last dollar.

The Judge smiled. “I’m so happy you approve. Now, shall we go take care of that transfer? Ms. Patton will get you set up on my terminal. I’ll just be a minute here.”

Once they had left, The Judge turned back toward us. “You don’t look

too pleased, Ms. Stewart,” he observed. Was that a tiny smile on his lips?

“You know, Your Honor, she’s lying to you,” I said carefully.

“Oh?”

“Even if she gives up the copies she’s told you about, she has more,” I pressed on. “And what about the other cells?”

He shook his head. “First of all, Ms. Stewart, there are no other cells.”

No other cells? But who had Corey been conferring with? Where did she get her information? Where... “Oh.”

The Judge openly smiled now. “That’s right. She would get information from one of you, or just observe things in the course of her day, and tell the rest of you that the information came from other cells.”

“But how can you be sure?” Nancy asked.

“We can’t,” The Judge admitted. “But it is very similar to a scam she pulled in Florida a few years ago while pretending to be a Cuban revolutionary. She is extremely good at that sort of thing. Besides, as each of you has had reason to note, while she is very good at gaining trust, she is slow to trust others. It’s very unlikely she would agree to be part of a larger organization like the one she had you believing existed.”

“But what about the other copies of the CD she undoubtedly still has?” I asked. “I spent many years in politics, Your Honor, and I’ve seen this pattern before. Once she’s succeeded in getting what she wants, she’ll want more.”

The Judge waved his hand in dismissal. “I appreciate your concern, Ms. Stewart, but let us worry about that. We have a more immediate problem—namely, what to do with the three of you.”

As one, we shifted uncomfortably. We were accessories to Corey’s scam, and even though we had cooperated with The Judge, our hands weren’t clean—especially mine.

“You present me with something of a problem,” The Judge told us.

“We weren’t aware that the Children of Lethe could regain their memories. We have researched the problem with Ms. Patton’s assistance and believe we understand what happened.”

“Your Honor,” I asked, “why is it that some people remember and others don’t? Corey told us that those who agreed to cooperate with you got to retain their memories.”

He shook his head. “Another lie I’m afraid. To be truthful, none of us completely understand. In ancient times, it didn’t seem to be a problem, though. I suspect it has to do with your modern world. You are sure of your science that you even question the existence of your own god. Perhaps some of our new residents are more open to the idea of what you would call magic than others. Those who are open to the concept seem to remember while those who are more... pragmatic do not.”

“Pragmatic... like a politician,” I suggested.

“Just so. Politicians are the most pragmatic people on the planet. Only the plate that was in your head seems to have softened that pragmatism in some physical way, allowing your original memories to resurface. You see, that is what each of you share. Each of you had some physical... abnormality in your head which had caused your minds to think along different pathways. While your transformations suppressed your original identities, copies of them took different paths in the brain and eventually resurfaced.”

He turned to Nancy. “Had you still retained your medical skills after your transformation, we would have found a more challenging role for you. Do you still want to be a doctor?”

Something crossed Nancy’s face that I had never seen before. The corners of her mouth pulled up in a hopeful smile, and there was a brightness in her eyes I had never seen before. “Oh yes! Do you mean...?” Her voice trailed off as if she were afraid even to ask the question. But she had to ask it eventually. “Will I still have my family?”

The Judge nodded. “Yes. Now it won’t be as challenging as your former medical career, but tomorrow morning, be at Ovid Memorial at

seven for your rounds. We've altered things to make it seem as if you have always been a physician."

There were tears in Nancy's eyes. I saw her mouth a "thank you," but she was too overcome with emotion to speak.

"Mr. Wellington!"

Chip jumped as The Judge called his name.

"Yes, Your Honor?"

"It seems that you seek nothing less than the secrets of the universe."

"Yes..."

"Some of them are here, of course," The Judge told him, "but they must be earned."

"How, Your Honor?" Chip asked.

"Why through hard work and study," The Judge replied. "I can offer you nothing for free, but I'm willing to let you continue to discover them for yourself. Just don't attempt to find them by snatching them from places you don't belong. Continue your studies, but leave the rest to us. Is that understood?"

There was a not-so-subtle threat in The Judge's words. The look of relieved agreement on Chip's face told me he would be seeking his future answers in the same way all physicists must and not in the archives of the gods. But just being close to them could provide some of the answers, couldn't it?

"And finally you, Ms. Stewart..."

I grimaced. It was my turn. Nancy and Chip had been given fairly passive roles in our little cell, but mine had been very, very active. Corey had not demanded anything for me. She had left me hanging out to dry. In a moment of panic, I thought it very likely that the anger The Judge must have bottled up inside regarding Corey's successful extortion was about to be visited upon me.

To my surprise, his voice was warm, almost fatherly. "Ms. Stewart,

what did you hope to gain from all of this? Our research indicates that you have already reconciled yourself to being April Stewart.”

It was a good question, but I already knew the answer. “Power,” I replied.

For the first time since I had known The Judge, he appeared puzzled. “Power? I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t,” I sighed. “You’ve never been without it. I’ve just realized it myself. When you made me into April Stewart, you made me powerless. You turned me into a girl—some might say that was a loss of power right there. Then you made me think that my social life was more important than anything else. The only way I’d have any power would be to marry the right guy and leach some of his power. As a congressman, I had power. I was one of the most powerful people in the nation—maybe even in the world—and I thought I had a shot at gaining even more power—enough power to make a difference in the world. When you took that away from me, I didn’t realize it at first, but when my old memories were restored, I realized you had stripped me of power every way possible. That’s why I fell for Corey’s line, I guess. By finding out what was going on here, I could regain some of that power.”

I sighed, nearly on the verge of tears. “The problem,” I continued in a softer tone, “is that I didn’t understand what was at stake.”

“Do you understand now?” The Judge asked, understanding evident in his own tone.

I nodded. “Some of it, yes. Your Oracle has predicted the end of the world, and we’re going to do it to ourselves.”

“Yes?”

“And you can stop it,” I concluded. “Or you could have if I hadn’t screwed everything up.”

“The future is not cast in stone,” The Judge explained.

Always in motion is the future. Thank you, Yoda. You’re a big help.

“We believe we can influence the future, yes,” The Judge admitted. “And you would be correct to surmise that Ovid is part of that influence.”

“But how...?”

He shook his head. “That is not for you to know—at least not now. Suffice it to say nothing Ms. McGregor has done will change things. Both the problem and our attempted solution remain the same. While you have certainly done your best to confound us, I also recall that you tried to warn us as well.”

I could only nod at his remarks.

“So tell me, April, if I were to release you... on probation shall we say, what would you do with yourself?”

It wasn’t a subject I really needed to think about. I had been thinking about it a lot for the past few days. “First, I’d change my major to political science,” I said. “I don’t know if it would even be possible, but politics is still in my blood and I’d like the chance to get back into it.”

The Judge nodded but reserved comment.

I turned and faced Chip. “And I guess the other thing I’d do is straighten up April’s social life. No more Pauls in my life, I think. I guess I’ll keep seeing physics graduate students or something like that.”

Chip smiled encouragingly.

The Judge favored me with a small smile. “Then consider that the terms of your probation. Also, with the holidays coming up, I suppose there’s no good way to keep you from going to Tulsa to see your parents. But henceforth, all of your trips out of Ovid must be approved by me. Of course, you will be subject to the limitations which prevent you from uttering our names in the current context.” He turned to face Chip and Nancy. “That goes for you two as well. I don’t expect any more trouble out of any of you. I can assure you if there is any trouble from you, you will not like the results. Am I clear?”

The three of us nodded.

Before anything else could be said, Cindy Patton escorted the new Corey back to The Judge. "I assume everything meets with your approval, Ms. McGregor?" he asked formally.

Corey nodded slightly, as if to an inferior. Her smug expression was enough to make me want to wring her new neck. "Everything is in order," she agreed. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I must be going."

The Judge gave a slight nod to match hers. "Of course."

We all stood silently listening to the sound of Corey's heels as she left the courtroom. She didn't even acknowledge us as she walked away. I guess we just weren't important to her anymore. After all, we had done our part in her little scam, and now we were left to suffer the consequences. Were it not for The Judge's leniency, I think I would have attacked her on the spot. As it was, there was nothing to be done but let her go.

"Don't worry, Ms. Stewart," The Judge murmured to me. "The game isn't over yet."

I felt a delicious shiver at his words. I seemed to remember from reading mythology as a young boy that mortals sometimes got the best of the gods, but not forever. The gods had long memories, and in the end, it was the mortals who paid. I might never know the final result, but I was certain The Judge would win in the end.

"Now, I expect all of you to get back to your roles," The Judge pronounced. "Dr. Franklin, I believe you may want to go by your office to familiarize yourself with your patient files before beginning your rounds tomorrow."

"My office?" Nancy said blankly. "But I don't even know where it is."

"Check in your purse," The Judge suggested. "It's on your business cards in there."

Shaking from excitement, she fished out her cards. With a grin, she gave one to Chip and another to me before hurrying off to her new professional life.

"And I believe you have a class to teach, Mr. Wellington."

Chip grinned. “Yes sir.” He turned to me. “Dinner tonight? Six?”

I smiled and nodded happily.

“If she’s finished with her work,” The Judge admonished. When he saw my look of confusion, he explained. “Betty Vest asked me to tell you that you still have your job. Of course, new security protocols have been added to her computer.”

“That’s fine with me. I never want to see that computer again,” I told him.

He dismissed me with a nod, so I walked out to the parking lot with Chip. I said nothing to him; just holding his hand as we walked was enough. I had a lot to think about. I’d be changing my major and preparing myself to get into politics again when I graduated. Oh, I’d have to earn my spurs. No one would nominate a young woman with no track record. Being a war hero as Conrad Williams had given me a big leg up on my career. No, it would take me many years—assuming I was still able to leave Ovid.

And being in public service meant even more to me now than ever before. I had seen the future—or at least a possible future—and it didn’t look good. I’d have to do whatever I could to prevent it from happening. Another word for war was conflagration. CONFLG had been the name of the file folder I had downloaded. War was coming—maybe tomorrow and maybe years down the road. I’d have to be ready for it...

“I always liked Conrad Williams,” Diana sighed as I returned to consciousness. “I think he would have made a good president. I voted for him five times the last time he ran for congress.”

“Five times?”

She shrugged.

“The thing that bothers me though,” I told her, “is that the bitch got away with it.”

“Don’t be too sure about that,” The Judge said from behind me.

Diana jumped off my desk and threw her arms around The Judge. “Hi, Daddy!” She always played her roles to the hilt, playing today the flighty little blonde. I wondered what classical scholars would have thought about Diana the Huntress doing her best Britney Spears imitation.

The Judge returned the hug, looking down at his daughter’s skirt.

“Didn’t they have anything shorter?”

“Oh, Daddy!”

The Judge merely smiled, and just for a moment, I saw a doting father in the place of the stern god I had come to know. He looked at me, noting my bemusement it would seem. “Have you read the morning paper, Ms. Patton?”

“Sorry, Your Honor. I didn’t have time today.” With school in Christmas recess and three children to get ready for day care, I didn’t have time to read the paper. Every now and then, I found myself wishing the twins could remember who they had been so they could be more helpful. Of course, then I would recall my two juvenile fraternity brothers as they drank thoughtlessly in the back seat during that fateful trip to Ovid. Did they remember anything of their previous lives?

The Judge tossed the morning edition of the *Tulsa World* on my desk.

“There’s a story on page three I think you’ll find interesting.” Indeed it was interesting. It seemed a Corey McGregor had been arrested in Dallas. Documents tying her to certain Middle-Eastern parties through a former lover had come to the attention of a special anti-terrorist task force headed by an Admiral Nepper. In addition to the evidence obtained in her apartment, the task force had traced a fifty million dollar payment made to an account in her name at an offshore bank that was cooperating with US authorities. The money had come from a known terrorist group.

“Was the money really from a terrorist group?” I asked.

“Of course it was,” The Judge replied. “It was a way to... I believe the expression is kill two birds with one stone.”

“April will be happy to hear about this when she gets back from Christmas break,” I commented. As April had remarked, the gods had long memories.

The Judge nodded in agreement, ushering Diana into his office. I was left to ponder on the works of the gods. I was certain that at that very moment, an unhappy Corey McGregor was sitting in a jail cell wanting to tell the authorities what had really happened. She couldn’t, though. What she had failed to keep in mind was that when she had The Judge transform her, he had undoubtedly removed from her the ability to speak of the gods, just as he had with the other members of the cell.

Poor Corey, I thought as I began to work on the stack of legal documents in front of me. She would have done well to study the works of Ovid for whom the town was named. If she had, she might have realized her efforts were doomed to failure as Ovid had warned in—appropriately enough—*Metamorphoses*:

The gods have their own rules.

Ovid XVI: The Derelict

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I think the day I really reconciled myself to being a woman was the day I discovered I really did like to shop. Yes, I know, it's a tired old stereotype, but the shopping trips I enjoyed with Susan Jager allowed the two of us to bond as friends and as women. And it didn't hurt that it gave us a few hours unfettered by children. I probably appreciated that time more than Susan, since she just had Joshua while I had Ashley and the twins.

Susan was leaving Joshua with her husband, and the two of us planned to spend most of Saturday morning at March's Department Store trying on spring fashions. Then we'd finish off our morning with a pleasant lunch at *The Greenhouse* complete with a glass of wine to lessen the late winter chill.

I had just dropped all three kids off at Donna Pearson's house down the street. Since Michelle—that's my other daughter—and Donna's daughter enjoyed playing together, it was common for us to leave our children with each other. I was amazed at how well Kimberly Pearson had settled into her role as a young girl, and I was glad Michelle had become her friend.

Of course, Mike mumbled about being left with a "bunch of girls." Since Kimberly had only an older sister and Mike's other sibling was little Ashley, he had a point. I had to chuckle to myself, knowing as Mike did not that once upon a time, he was one of my fraternity brothers and would have loved to have been surrounded by "a bunch of girls." Besides, Kimberly used to be male and remembered it, so I doubted if Mike would be completely left out.

Susan had just pulled up in our driveway as I got home from the Pearson's house. She had agreed to drive, and I think she just wanted to show off her new Windstar van. As I admired the gleaming dark-blue vehicle, I couldn't help but think her law practice had come a long

way from the days when she drove a battered old Toyota.

"Very nice," I commented as she stepped proudly from the van.

"We like it," she grinned. Then, a little wistfully, she added, "But I still miss my Lexus sometimes."

"Another life," I commented. Most places, that would have just been an expression, but in Ovid, it was a statement of fact.

"Are you ready to go?"

"In a minute," I replied. "It's a little nippy out today. I think I'll go in and get a warmer coat."

"Yeah, and I think I'll use the restroom," Susan said. "You know, when I was a man, I could go half the day and not have to take a piss. Now that I'm a woman, I can't hold it back an hour."

"Or ten minutes when you're pregnant," I laughed, and Susan laughed with me. It was great having a friend like Susan. Since we had both been born male, we found a lot in common to gripe about. But to be honest, neither of us would have given up our new lives for anything.

To my surprise, I smelled coffee when I opened the door. Granted, Jerry and I had shared a pot earlier in the morning before he went off to the store, but this coffee was not only fresh but smelled like no coffee I had ever smelled before.

"Anyone for a cup?" an attractive twenty-something redhead called from the door, a glass coffee pot in hand. She was dressed as a fifties housewife (or what the ads of the fifties would have you believe housewives dress like), complete with a homey full-skirted dress in bright yellow, a frilly white apron, three-inch heels, and, of course, pearls. While I had never seen this freckled, attractive young woman before, I knew at once who she was.

"Diana!"

"Hi, girls," she replied brightly. "Care for some Blue Mountain? I just picked it up in Jamaica about an hour ago. I can guarantee you, there's nothing like it."

“I’ve had Blue Mountain coffee before,” Susan told her, “but I don’t remember it smelling this good.”

“That’s because it doesn’t travel well,” Diana explained. “I just brewed this pot in Montego Bay a few minutes ago and popped up here.”

“I’d love some,” I told her as I shivered a little from the chill outside.

“Then let’s all go in the kitchen and have some while we talk,” she suggested. I knew more than talk was in store. Diana always showed up when there had been a particularly interesting transformation in Ovid. The funny thing was that I couldn’t think of any transformation that fit the bill. All of the cases before The Judge lately had been rather mundane.

While all of the gods were entitled to view the records of The Judge’s cases which were lodged inexplicably (if one didn’t accept magic) inside my head, few took advantage of that service. Diana, on the other hand, viewed all of the most interesting cases, and I had begun to suspect such a review was part of her duties to her father, Jupiter. Most of the time, I expected her, knowing from local viewings which cases would attract her attention. This time, however, I was at a complete loss.

As Susan and I sat at the table, Diana poured coffee like a perfect hostess. I sipped at mine first while Susan doctored hers with a little sugar. “My God, this coffee is incredible!” I exclaimed.

Diana smiled. “Isn’t it? Ceres owns a coffee plantation in Jamaica, so I can assure you that this is the best of the best.”

“It’s the best coffee I’ve ever tasted!” Susan chimed in, a look of pleasant surprise on her face. Given Susan’s former life as a prominent and rather wealthy attorney, that was saying something.

While Susan and Diana talked about the particulars of the coffee, I tried to sort through the recent cases which might have attracted Diana’s attention. Oklahoma highways are tricky in the winter and there weren’t as many travellers wandering into Ovid. In the past three weeks, The Judge had only tried five cases, and none of them

seemed to warrant the interest of any of the gods, let alone Diana's interest.

Well, Susan and I had shopping to do. It was time to test the waters. "So, Diana, I assume you're just passing through this morning."

Diana laughed a sparkling laugh worthy of a goddess. "No, silly! I've come to view a story."

"Well, Susan and I were just about to go shopping..."

She put her hand on mine. "Don't worry, dear. You know it will not take long."

I had to admit she was right about that. It was odd, but while submerged in the life of one of the transformed, only ten minutes or so went by, but it seemed as if we had lived the life of another person for several days. "All right, Diana, but I'm at a loss. Whose life did you want to see?"

"Marsha Henry," she replied decisively.

I mentally sifted through the files of recent court appearances until...

"Marsha Henry?" I blurted out. "But there's nothing interesting about her, is there?" In fact, no one else had asked to view Marsha's life. She was just one more nondescript resident of Ovid who had once been an even more nondescript man in another reality.

Diana smiled a smile which would have made the Cheshire cat envious. "We'll see. Are you ready?"

I took one more sip of the delicious coffee and sighed, "I guess there's no time like the present."

And with that, I drifted off into a familiar trance...

I needed a drink.

That was nothing new, I suppose. Any time I was awake, I needed a drink. The need tugged at my insides, causing a parched sensation in my throat and an emptiness in my belly. To make matters worse, I

was beginning to feel—feel the cold, the bitter wind, and the sourness in my stomach. Wine would warm my insides—wine and an open boxcar heading south.

I had hung around Kansas City far too long. I'd had sense enough to get out of Chicago before the end of the summer. I thought Kansas City would be a good place to winter over if I could find work, and I had been right for a while. I had worked as a day laborer—standing around in the morning bumming cigarettes and waiting to be selected for some low-wage, low-skill job that paid off in cash at the end of the day. Through a warm fall, jobs had been plentiful. There was always enough money to fill my stomach with cheap food and buy a cheap room where I could drink cheap wine in peace. For a man in my position, it was pretty decent living.

And then came winter, and it became pretty certain that little Bobby Wallace's mother had, indeed, raised at least one fool—me. With the swift coming of winter, the need for day laborers lessened. Much of the work was outdoor work, sometimes construction related. That all slowed down when the snow began to fly. What few jobs were left went to the Mexes. They were undocumented and worked about as cheap as a man could work. Plus the guys who came up to the work centers in their dirty pickup trucks to hire laborers knew they wouldn't have to withhold any taxes on them or pay them for overtime. I guess I can't blame the Mexes. Many of them had families back in Mexico who needed to be fed any way possible.

The Christmas season helped a little bit. People tend to feel sorrier for the down and out during the holidays. So supplementing my meagre day wages with panhandling, I managed to get by until after the first of the year. But with the first of the year, what little work I had managed to get dried up completely and people stopped giving me money on the streets as the reality of holiday bills made them more niggardly.

So with no work, I holed up in the mission for a couple of nights, my money to rent even a cheap room long exhausted. It was tough; they wouldn't allow me a bottle so the need got worse. But at least it cleared out my brain just a little bit. I thought about it and figured it

was time to head south. Maybe in Dallas or Houston it would be warm enough to provide more day work. Of course, there'd be more Mexes, but what the Hell? There were more Mexes than jobs in Kansas City. Even if that were true in Texas, it wouldn't be so goddamned cold.

I've heard some of the old-timers talk about how it used to be easier to travel back in the days before computers. Railroad cars had a bill of lading attached to the cars so you could see which city the train was headed to. Now, they all had computer codes read by scanners so you just had to hop an available freight and hope to God it wasn't headed someplace even colder.

I was familiar with the concept of computerization and couldn't blame the railroads for going to it. Hey, I might have been a little down on my luck, but I had an education. I even had a year of college at the University of Illinois. That was some of the best partying of my life, but no sense in dwelling on what was.

The other problem was the railcars themselves. Boxcars were the preferred mode of travel. Unlike the gondolas and flatcars, they were enclosed, and believe me, you don't want to be a passenger on an open freight car travelling at seventy miles an hour through a cold winter night. The only problem is that there weren't as many boxcars as there used to be. Most stuff that could be loaded in boxcars could be loaded on a truck cheaper. Trains now mostly carried grain, coal, oil, and other commodities which were carried in cars that didn't have the relatively comfortable confines of a boxcar. And the few boxcars that were out there locked up better than they used to, making it hard to find an empty to ride in.

Still, hope springs eternal. I found myself standing in the shadows on a cold, dark January night in the middle of the Argentine—the huge railroad yard that helped make Kansas City the second largest rail center in the US. And my hope was rewarded, for after a few minutes of searching, there it was—an open boxcar.

It was an old one—I was sure of that. The logo on the side of one panel was an odd-shaped design in black with the words 'Rock Island' in white. Along the other side panel were the words 'Route of the

Rockets.' Now, I might not have been an expert on railroads, but I was pretty sure the Rock Island folded back when I was in elementary school in Chicago.

In fact, the whole train looked to be made up of over-aged cars bearing road names which I was sure were long gone and nearly forgotten. It looked out of place in an era of merged railroads and gleaming unit trains. Even the diesel poised to pull the cars out of the yard looked like a relic of the past with its cab-forward rounded nose structure. I hadn't seen anything quite like it since the commuter trains Metra ran in Chicago twenty years ago.

My heart sank. The age and condition of the equipment indicated to me that the train was a local freight, going down some little spur line an hour or two. This wasn't a train that would take me all the way to Texas.

I would have walked on, ignoring the open car, but I suddenly had reason to change my mind.

"Look what we got here."

The voice was young but it contained a note of danger. I turned and saw three men silhouetted by the powerful yard lights. They were no more than thirty yards away and were slowly drawing closer. In their hands, I could see the dark outlines of lengths of pipe, gleaming with the frozen slick of winter condensation.

In the past three weeks, five men of my circumstances had been found murdered within a three-mile radius of where I stood. There seemed to be no motive for the murders; after all, men of my circumstances had nothing worth stealing. Police suspected gangs of youths, killing for the fun of it or to make their mark with their gangs. I had heard the whispered warning from others like me, but I hadn't taken them to heart—until now.

"Just stay where you are!" the same voice ordered. "We won't hurt you."

"Much," another voice giggled, sounding high on something.

“Shut up!” hissed the third.

My mind may not have been the clearest in the world, dulled by drink, cold and fatigue, but it was clear enough to realize if I didn’t do something quickly, I was going to be the sixth victim of this gang.

“Get up here!” a voice called out from behind me. In the darkness of the boxcar’s doorway, I saw someone moving. “Come on, hurry!”

There wasn’t time to think or even anything to think about. I didn’t know who had called out to me. For all I knew, whoever was in that boxcar could be a killer, too. But I knew instinctively that if I didn’t reach the boxcar, I was a dead man. I ran for the door, faster than I thought I was capable of doing, catching an outstretched arm which hoisted me up into the car. At least there was no bludgeon awaiting me. But I still wasn’t safe I realized, as I heard footsteps approaching the car rapidly.

“Quick, help me get this door closed!” the man in the boxcar with me ordered. I complied at once, realizing that the two of us were no match for the gang. Closing the door and keeping it closed would determine our survival. Still shaking from fear and the cold, I managed to stay on my feet, helping him slide the heavy metal door shut to the yells and curses of the three youths below.

“It won’t lock, so hold on!” the man ordered. Matching his motions, I put my weight against the door. With any luck, we’d be able to hold out against them. There were three of them, each in better shape than I, but we had the floor of the boxcar to help our leverage. They would be trying to pull the door open from a poor angle.

“The other door’s locked,” my savior told me, grunting as he pushed against an assault on the door. “If we can hold on until the train leaves, we’ll be safe.”

But how long would that be? I wondered. And what if those guys had guns? The door was steel but I wasn’t sure it was strong enough to withstand a gunshot.

Suddenly the car lurched, throwing both of us to the ground. I fell to

the floor, my face looking out a two-foot wide gap where either our actions or the youths had opened the door. I was looking directly into a pair of feral eyes and watched in horror as the youth's mouth broadened into a toothy grin.

But the train was definitely moving. I could see the other two youths had been pushed to the ground by the sudden jerk of the train. The grin suddenly disappeared as the would-be killer realized the only way he could be sure of getting me was to face whoever was in the dark car with me—by himself. “Son of a bitch!” he growled, his moment for choosing to jump on the car suddenly passing. I grunted in relief, suddenly too exhausted to get up from the floor.

“That was a close one!” my unexpected travelling companion said from the darkness. I could hear the sound of a zipper come from the same direction. He had a bag, I realized with envy. My own bag and all of my possessions—what few I had—had been stolen a couple of days before while I was... well, okay, while I was sleeping it off.

Suddenly, the interior of the car burst into a yellow-orange light, faint at the center of the car but bright on the floor where my companion sat. At first, I thought he had started a fire. That's what most of us on the road would have done. Instead, it must have been some sort of new device—something really high tech—for it was small and circular, no more than the size of a golf ball. It gave off a nearly blinding yellow light, and even from a distance, I could feel its heat.

The man grinned, unusually white teeth for one of our ilk showing surrounded by a beard of dark brown that was just beginning to turn gray. His clothing was old and road-worn as would befit a knight of the road, but he seemed remarkably hale and hearty for someone reduced to our circumstances. He scooted away from the fire, wincing a little and holding his stomach. Perhaps he wasn't as healthy as I had first thought.

“Come and join me, Bob,” he offered, motioning to a spot next to his device.

My blood froze in spite of the growing warmth. “How did you know my

name?" I demanded, stiffening defensively.

"That's not really important, is it?" the man grinned again. "What? Do you think I'm a wizard or something?"

"I didn't tell you my name," I argued, not moving.

"Well, maybe you did and maybe you didn't," he allowed. "But that is your name, isn't it? Shall I call you Bob?"

I didn't bother to answer. "And what should I call you?"

He shrugged. "Call me whatever you like. Or better yet, just call me Pro. That's what most people call me these days."

It wasn't unusual for those of us on the road to come up with a short nickname. Mine was Wall—short for my last name. No one had called me Bob in years. Pro, of course, had to be short for professional—but professional what? Men on the road found strange and often seamy ways of making a living. I wasn't sure I wanted to know how he came up with the name Pro.

"So, are you going to sit?"

Warily, I sat down beside him. My body involuntarily relaxed in the warmth the object gave off. I sat opposite Pro, but not directly across from his device. I wanted to be able to see his hands and not be blinded by the light. It was then I noticed that the source of the heat and light seemed to actually be floating a couple of inches above the floor. I reached out for it in curiosity.

"Better not touch it," Pro advised calmly. "It's hot."

"What is it?" I asked. I knew in my position that I didn't always have the resources to keep up on every new invention, but surely something as useful as Pro's device would have been the talk of the nation.

"Just a gadget," he replied, telling me nothing. "Nothing special."

"Yeah, right."

"Here."

I had been so drawn to the object that I hadn't noticed Pro had reached back into his bag. Looking up, I noticed a bottle of amber liquid in his outstretched hand. The label was black and white—Jack Daniel's, I realized.

"You look like a man who could use a drink," he suggested, motioning for me to take the bottle from his hand.

Gratefully, I did so. But at the last minute, caution stayed my shaking hand before I could raise the bottle to my lips. Pro was being very generous with something most people like me didn't get to enjoy very often. Why was he being so decent to me? Was there something in the whiskey?

"Suspicious?"

I looked at him. His clear eyes were laughing at me. He had to know, though, that suspicion was what kept men like him and me alive. Still, I asked myself, what did he have to gain by slipping me a Mickey? The only things I owned I was wearing, and they weren't worth robbing me. Besides, the whiskey looked so good...

I tried to sip it; honest I did. But I had been without a drink for so long, I ended up taking a big swig from the bottle. It burned as it went down my throat, but it felt so good. I relished the near-pain from the fire as the liquor washed its way down to my stomach.

"Good, isn't it?" Pro asked.

I nodded. "The best."

Pro leaned back on his side, grinning at me. "Now, I've got to be honest with you. There is something in the whiskey, but don't worry—it won't knock you out. I just wanted to give you something to calm you down so you'd listen to my story."

"All right." Whatever was in the whiskey had already taken effect. I had never felt like that before. I was awake and alert in spite of the whiskey, but I was calm. I trusted Pro. I would have trusted him enough to jump off the train if he'd asked me to. Fortunately, he didn't.

“Listen to that,” he commanded. When he saw my look of confusion, he explained. “I’m talking about the sound of the train’s wheels on the rails. Most rails are smooth now—they’re welded together and come in much longer sections than they used to. Hear that sound?”

He was referring to the more insistent clickety-clack of the wheels on the track. It had become louder and more frequent, its sound amplified in the crisp winter air.

“It means this train is off the main line and moved onto old, abandoned rails.”

“But why would it do that?” I asked, surprising myself with how calm I was. It was as if I had become a detached observer in my own body.

“Because it has just one item to deliver tonight, Bob—you.”

“Me?”

He nodded. “That’s right. Every car on this train is empty tonight except this one. Don’t worry, though. The railroad won’t lose money. The Rock Island went out of business in the early eighties. This whole train is sort of a past memory, diverted for tonight. In fact, it’s taking you someplace where the Rock Island didn’t even have track.”

Maybe I should have been just a little frightened, but the whiskey had chased away any fears. Just to be sure, I took another drink—a smaller one this time. “But who would want me?” I laughed. “I’m a nobody.”

“And you’re wise to realize that,” Pro told me. “But sometimes, even nobodies have their uses. Some very powerful... people think you’re useful.”

In a strange sort of way, that made me feel good. It had been a long time since anyone had said something like that to me.

“We think you’re useful, too,” he added.

“We?” I looked around the car, half-expecting someone else to emerge from the shadows. No one did.

“A group I’m associated with,” he replied nonchalantly. “You needn’t concern yourself with them. Just trust me when I tell you that they’re

working for a just cause.”

Of course I trusted him, I thought, taking another sip of the fine whiskey. I trusted Pro with my life because... well, just because.

“You’re being taken to a town called Ovid,” Pro explained. “It’s in Oklahoma. I know, don’t say it: you’ve never heard of it. Well, that’s not surprising because you see Ovid is run by a group of gods from classical mythology. You remember the ones I mean—Jupiter, Mars, Venus...”

I couldn’t help it; I broke out laughing. “Get real, Pro. Even I know there’s no such thing as those gods.” Not even the power of the drugs in the whiskey was enough to make me buy into that story.

“Didn’t I tell you to trust me?”

“Yes, but...”

“Then trust me on this point, Bob. You’ll have plenty of reason to believe me once you get there,” he assured me. “Once that happens, you’ll have to believe me when I say that I’m the only one who can save you from the... beings who run Ovid—just like I was the one to save you tonight.”

I didn’t want to believe him. The whole story was just too weird. But on the other hand, there was the oddness about this train. Then there was Pro’s strange fire. As for the drugs in the whiskey, I suppose any number of people might have access to those, but I had never known such drugs to act so quickly or completely. And lastly, there was the fact that Pro had rescued me. If it hadn’t been for him, I might have been the next victim of that gang.

“What do you want of me?” I asked.

Pro shrugged. “In a word—information. We have reason to believe you’ll be in a position to help us. Once you’ve done so, we’ll help you.”

“What if I don’t need your help?”

Pro grinned. “You will; trust me on that.”

So I did.

“Now it’s time I was leaving,” he announced, rising to his feet. The strange little fiery ball of light rose with him until it was chest high on him. “Don’t worry about the lack of heat in the car after I go, Bob. It should stay warm in here for at least three hours and by then it will be dawn. Now, I think you should get some sleep.”

As the word died on his lips, I felt my eyes close and a contented sleep fell over me before I could think of another thing.

I’m not sure what woke me. Maybe it was the sound of a truck shifting gears. Or it might have been the sound of birds in a nearby tree. Maybe it was the sound of laughing children on their way to school. Whatever it was, I heard all three of those sounds as I slowly returned to consciousness.

My back hurt, the result of sleeping on the rough wood floor of the boxcar. At least I had slept warm, though, the heat remaining long after Pro...

Pro?

Where was Pro?

I rose up, needing a drink to get the taste of last night’s whiskey out of my mouth. Where was Pro? He must have the bottle. I looked around and saw no sign of him. He was an odd guy, but I kind of liked him. Talking with him had helped to pass the time. What had we talked about? Nothing consequential, I supposed. We must have talked about where we were from. I must have talked to him about being raised in Chicago and maybe I even bragged to him that I had even gone to college for a while. He had probably told me where he was from but I didn’t remember.

Come to think of it, I didn’t remember much of anything from the night before, except sharing that bottle after Pro had helped me escape that gang. Maybe I had had more to drink than I thought I had. All I could remember was that Pro was the right sort of guy—the sort of guy you trusted.

I stretched, feeling remarkably refreshed considering that I had spent

the night sleeping on the hard floor of the boxcar. Maybe it was the whiskey, or maybe it was just that somehow, the railcar was warmer than it should have been. I seemed to remember that Pro had started a fire... Funny, there wasn't any residue from the fire. It must have been a portable heater of some sort. 'Now, there was something odd about that heater, but what was it?' I asked myself.

Shrugging and letting my questions drift to the subbasement of my mind, I got to my feet. My stomach growled loudly, reminding me that I hadn't eaten since before I had made my way down to the railroad yard. I had a couple of dollars in my pocket in change—well, a dollar eighty to be exact. Maybe it would be enough to get something to fill me up at some trackside eatery. I didn't require much in the way of food. Most people like me with a fondness for drink really didn't eat much. Plus, being on the road like I was meant that eating irregularly was pretty normal, and you got used to the constant pangs in your gut.

Bright sunshine spilled in the doorway of the boxcar, and a slight breeze promised brisk but not cold air. The bare tree limbs told me that wherever I was, it was still winter, but the weather promised to be milder than the bitter cold of Kansas City. My shabby coat would be sufficient for the weather outside. Still, just to be sure, I pulled the coat tightly around me before I jumped from the car.

A strange sight greeted me. I was expecting to be in a large town, someplace like Tulsa or Oklahoma City by now. Instead, I was at the south end of the business district of some little town. I looked around to see if the train had just come to an intermittent stop and got my next surprise—there was no train. Oh, the boxcar was there, emblazoned with the Rock Island logo, but the car rested on rails that went nowhere. The track began near one set of trucks and ended at the other set, making me wonder how in the name of God the car had come to be parked there.

I looked all around, but I saw no sign of additional tracks anywhere. Instead, all I saw was that small town business district, bustling with typical morning activity. Then I looked back once more at the boxcar, getting still another surprise—this one the biggest yet.

The boxcar was gone.

I don't mean it had been moved. I would have heard it if it had been. It was just... gone, and so were the tracks under it. Where it had been, there was nothing but a grassy plot, covered with a few shrubs and the browning remains of last summer's weeds.

Now I knew men in my line who drank themselves to the point that they saw things that just weren't there, but I wasn't one of them. I had always managed to avoid the DTs, and besides, I really hadn't had all that much to drink the night before. And folks who get the DTs just see things; they don't ride them hundreds of miles through the night. What the hell was happening?

I suppose I only had one reasonable decision to make. Whatever had happened, I was now stuck in some little town far from where I had expected to be. Now I'd just have to make the best of it. Small towns had day jobs, too. All I needed to do was walk up that main street and look for someplace where I could trade my muscles for a few dollars. Then I'd get something to eat, something to drink, and maybe even treat myself to a pack of cheap smokes before finding the nearest railroad yard and continuing my journey further south.

So I began to walk up the main street, which I quickly discovered was, in fact, called 'Main Street' toward the center of activity. There were a few morning shoppers and businessmen hustling for probable appointments. The strange thing to me was that everyone seemed to be better dressed than I would have expected. Coats and ties were worn by a number of men and an unusual number of women were in skirts. It was nothing overt, but more like the stylized version of a small town one might see on television.

Also odd was how prosperous the town looked. I had spent most of my life in cities, but I had visited smaller towns before. Most small towns were drying up. Farming was no longer labor intensive, so the small towns were no longer needed to service that industry. Certainly none of the small towns I had ever visited had the look of affluence Ovid did—unless they had become fashionable suburbs of nearby cities.

Ovid? Now where had I heard the name of the town? I wondered. I decided I must have seen it on a sign or something as I walked up the street. Yes, that had to be the answer.

But odder still were the people that I could almost see through. I realized it was probably something the booze was doing to me, but I had never noticed anything like it before. I couldn't really see through people; it was just that I sensed what was on the other side of them, as if I could see right through them. It's hard to explain and even harder to understand, I suppose.

I was just beginning to look over the various businesses, deciding which ones to hit up for work when I heard the siren behind me. It wailed for only a second or two, enough to make me turn around in surprise. I hadn't even heard the police car drive up behind me and yet there it was, as if it had been there all along and simply escaped my notice.

I just stood there trying to look harmless as the big cop got out of the car. I was used to the routine. It wasn't the first time I had been roused by the cops, and I was sure it wouldn't be the last time either. People in my circumstances were never very popular with the authorities. In cities, there were so many of us that we were tolerated. In small towns, we were usually asked to leave—and not always asked nicely. I tried to stand up straight and look as dignified as I could. Fat chance.

“Good morning.”

The cop's voice was noncommittal and as guarded as the mirrored sunglasses that covered his eyes. At least he hadn't started out with a string of derogatory profanities as some cops do. He walked toward me with an easy grace, his trim body moving effortlessly as if I were an old acquaintance rather than a potential town nuisance.

“Good morning, Officer...” I peered at his nametag, “...Mercer.”

“You're new here.” It wasn't a question.

“That's right,” I replied as nonchalantly as I could. “Just passing

through.”

“You’d better come with me,” he told me.

“Have I done something wrong?” I asked as innocently as I could manage.

“Just come with me,” he repeated. Although his voice was neither loud nor gruff, his tone gave notice that he was used to being obeyed. He had opened the back door of his cruiser, so with a resigned shrug I did as I was told.

Just my luck. In the cities, cops have just too much to do to run in guys like me. Besides, even if they did, their superiors would chew their butts for wasting their time and generating all the paperwork it took to process us. Small towns might be that way and they might not. This Mercer guy had to either be bored or some sort of an officious pencil dick to waste his time on me. What the hell, though, I thought. A few hours in a nice warm cell and a hot meal while he wasted his time trying to see if I was wanted on any outstanding warrants and I’d be back out on the street again. It wasn’t like I was in a big hurry to get anywhere. The only bad thing about jail would be that I wouldn’t be able to get a drink there. I felt an uncomfortable shudder in my body at that last thought. I really needed a drink.

I slid into the back of the cleanest police cruiser I had ever seen. There were no dark bloodstains and the fresh odor told me nobody had ever puked in this car. The upholstery smelled as if it had just come out of the factory. Yeah, this Mercer guy had to be an officious pencil dick. Nobody else would keep a squad car this clean.

The cop said nothing to me as we made what turned out to be a pretty short drive to City Hall. That gave me time to look around at the town that was probably going to be my home for a couple of days until they got tired of feeding and housing me for free and figured out how to get me out of town. It was actually a nice little town in a way. It reminded me of the town in Wisconsin where my grandparents had lived.

Or at least the way it used to look. As I’ve already noted, little farm towns used to be prosperous, but as farming became less labor

intense and people moved to the cities for better opportunities, most small towns were beginning to die. My grandparents' hometown was already showing signs of decline before they died. By now, I imagined it was a lot smaller than I remembered it.

But Ovid was obviously prosperous. People were well dressed, most cars were fairly new, and there were even bustling businesses still on Main Street that hadn't been forced out of operation by the nearest Wal-Mart—assuming there was one. It looked like an updated version of Pleasantville—at least from what I remembered of that movie. I had watched it on TV someplace where I had managed to get a bottle of wine, so I didn't remember much of the movie. I just remembered it involved some little fifties town where everything was bright and pedestrian. Of course, come to think of it, I don't remember any cop in the film rousting a guy just minding his own business. Just remember, I told myself, tonight it will be cold and you'll be in a nice warm cell with a full belly.

The only thing that kept me wondering about Ovid was all those damned see-through people. They were everywhere, and they acted just like everybody else. No one else seemed to notice anything odd about them though, so I told myself it was just some effect booze was having on my eyesight. Or maybe because I hadn't eaten in a while, I was starting to hallucinate. Whatever the reason, 'there's no such thing as transparent people,' I told myself.

Officer Mercer pulled up in front of City Hall. It was actually an impressive municipal building for a small town. Again, I noted Ovid appeared to be prosperous to afford such a building. I really had expected to be taken to a cell. In fact, I was really hoping to be taken to a cell when I got a glance at an attractive black woman in a police uniform walking by. Even in pants, she was a number. I tried to picture her bringing my meals on a tray every day, maybe dressed in something short and skimpy.

No such luck, though—Officer Mercer had a firm grip on my arm as he walked me down a corridor leading to what I knew would be courtrooms.

He opened an impressively large oak door for me. Inside, I could see the whole courtroom was set up just awaiting the entrance of some overweight small-town judge. My heart sank. Some half-assed local magistrate was going to try me, then suspend the sentence if I'd get out of town by whatever means he'd decided upon. There'd be no warm cell and hot meals for me tonight. More than likely, Officer Mercer would drive me a few miles out of town—just far enough that the next town down the road—I would be told—was closer. It's commonly known as the bum's rush and it wouldn't be the first time I had experienced it.

There was also an attractive brunette seated at the defendant's table. Undoubtedly, that would be my public defender—another name for an overworked and underpaid attorney who pretends to defend the indigent so that all the proper forms of justice are satisfied. She'd be the one who pleaded for a suspended sentence if I would just leave town and let her and all of her fine well-off neighbors go back to thinking there weren't really any poor folks in the world.

Shit.

I guess that's just me feeling sorry for myself. I wasn't raised poor. I had come from a middle class family and had been given enough opportunities to succeed that I knew in my heart I had only myself to blame for my circumstances. Maybe I deserved to be thrown out of town. It wasn't that bad; it had happened to me before. Maybe if I was real nice to this cute little public defender, she'd arrange to let me stay overnight in the jail before they booted me out of town. That way, I'd at least get a hot meal or two.

"I'm Susan Jager," the brunette said, extending her hand.

I just looked at her hand for a moment. It was soft and delicate with well-shaped nails coated in a very light pink. The bracelet on her wrist was tasteful if not expensive. The reason I just looked at her hand is that I was surprised she had offered it. My own hand was dirty with black grime under the nails. The fingerless gloves I wore were no better, having dulled from their original olive color to a dingy brown. Still, she showed no sign of reluctance to take my hand eventually; I

offered it at last.

“Bob Wallace,” I replied softly.

She grinned. “I know. Look, Bob, we just have a couple of minutes before The Judge appears. I need to talk to you about your appearance.”

“I suppose it’s a little late to change into a fresh suit,” I pointed out with no little irony.

“I wasn’t referring to your clothes,” she told me, smiling at my witticism. “I just want to make sure you don’t say or do something that might get you into trouble.”

“I thought I was already in trouble.”

She shook her head. “I can tell you’re not taking this very seriously. Maybe you think if you do something off the wall, The Judge will throw you into jail for a few days and the city will have to feed you and give you a warm bed.”

That, of course, was exactly what I had been thinking. My public defender might be a youngster fresh out of law school, I thought to myself, but something about her spoke of wisdom well beyond her tender years.

“That won’t happen,” she went on. “You need to understand that right now. The way you conduct yourself here today will have great bearing on the rest of your life. Do you understand that?”

I nodded, but I really didn’t understand. She was making this sound like a trial for a major crime. Maybe this was her first case. Maybe she wasn’t as sage as I thought she was. Or maybe this judge she was talking about was one of those small town justices who thought he was hot shit. If he took a dislike to me, I could find myself someplace like a county lockup. That wouldn’t be as pleasant as their little jail was sure to be, and using prisoners for unpleasant labor in small towns wasn’t unheard of. I decided it was best to take her advice.

She must have seen something that assured her I’d behave. “Good,” she said. “Now, have you been drinking?”

“Not this morning,” I hedged. I didn’t bother to add that I’d gladly do anything she told me to do for a shot of whiskey.

“Okay. Then when The Judge asks you a question, just answer politely. Don’t try to BS him; he’s heard it all before.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “I’ll just tell him I’m on my way south and just ended up here by accident.” Some accident. How could I explain that I got here on a nonexistent railroad car, over tracks that weren’t there anymore?

Now I suppose in retrospect I should have realized there was something fishy about my whole situation. How did I end up in Ovid in the first place? And once I was there, how was it that probably the only cop car in town was right there to pick me up? Somehow, those questions just never seemed to come to my mind—until later.

“All rise!” Officer Mercer’s voice called out. He mumbled the usual stuff about the Municipal Court of the City of Ovid being in session while I stood there wishing I could have a drink.

The Judge was impressive, much to my surprise. Rather than the fat, pompous rube I had expected, he looked polished enough to be a big-time judge with his neatly trimmed beard and gold-rimmed glasses. He carried himself like he owned the world, and his robe flowed like a royal cape. It made me feel just a little bit important that such an impressive man would spend his time trying to figure out the best way to run me out of town.

“The first case is the City of Ovid versus Robert James Wallace on a charge of vagrancy,” he intoned, his voice deep and commanding. But how had he known my middle name? I didn’t recall giving it to the cop.

“Your Honor,” my attorney began, “I would like to point out that my client is not in the best condition. I don’t think he’s eaten in some time.”

That was true, I realized, and my stomach let out a little growl in confirmation.

“Yes, Ms. Jager,” The Judge agreed. “But it should be pointed out that his physical condition is much of his own making.”

“According to the file, you bear some responsibility for his condition, Your Honor,” she returned confidently. I just wondered what she was talking about. What file?

“That is somewhat true and why I am willing to be somewhat lenient,” The Judge replied. “Were that not so, I would argue that he had surrendered his humanity. I am willing to accept a plea of guilty with the assurance that the sentence will be both lenient and appropriate.”

My attorney looked at me. This was a little over my head, so I just nodded in response. “My client is willing to plead guilty with those assurances, Your Honor.”

“Step forward, Mr. Wallace,” The Judge commanded. When I had done so, he began, “Mr. Wallace, few things disturb me more than to see a man throw away a promising future by developing a dependence upon drugs or alcohol. I’m going to put you in what might be called ‘supervised probation’ for a few years. Try to do a better job with yourself this time.”

I hadn’t the foggiest notion what he was talking about. Probation? What did he mean by that? By sundown, I’d probably be over in the next county, never to cross the Ovid city limits again. But if I had been confused by what he had already said, I was completely lost when he spoke again. His words sounded foreign, but not a language I could readily identify.

It’s hard for me to describe what happened next. In retrospect, I now realize that my mind had been long dulled by the effects of alcohol, so when The Judge worked his magic on me, I simply became more befuddled than usual. My consciousness seemed to be floating in a warm liquid, ebbing and flowing with some strange mental tide. I felt almost as if facts and feelings were being poured into my mind while my identity, partially obscured from years of drinking, fought valiantly to survive this onslaught.

What made the attack all the more terrible was that the facts entering

my mind seemed to be coming from two sources. One source, I knew, was the Judge. Whatever he was chanting was opening my mind to new thoughts and new feelings. But the other source was coming from somewhere else. It was information. I suddenly remembered everything Pro had told me—the fantastic story of a town controlled by the gods of classical mythology. I had scoffed at the story when he told it to me. I wasn't scoffing now.

There were other facts flowing into my mind as well, but they were moving so fast I couldn't quite capture them in my consciousness. I knew it was nothing Pro had discussed with me, but I also sensed they were coming from him nonetheless. I couldn't dwell on them more. I had more immediate problems to deal with.

While my mind was being assaulted with impossible thoughts, I also sensed something happening to my body. It was tingling and somehow shifting, as if the rigid structure of my body had suddenly been reduced to a mound of quivering gelatin. The sensation wasn't unpleasant exactly. It was something like the shudder one gets after a long stretch, only extended to every part of my body.

Suddenly, my head began to clear and I felt a hand gripping my arm. I hadn't realized it, but I had been about to fall down in a faint. I looked around to see Officer Mercer. He seemed a little taller than before—more imposing. But I was glad for his support.

"Take the defendant to the high school," The Judge was telling him. "The changes should be complete by the time you get there."

High school? Changes? What was he talking about? My mind was still as fuzzy as it would have been if I had downed a quart of wine. Why was I being taken to the high school? Did they have some program to show derelicts to the students with a warning of study hard or this could happen to you? I giggled at the thought.

Yes, giggled.

I had spent a lot of years swimming in a lot of bottles, but even with my mind fogged I was reasonably certain I had never giggled in my life.

My mind although starting to clear was still in a fog, I found myself back in the backseat of Officer Mercer's police car once more. At least the backseat was roomy—much roomier than I had remembered it before. I carefully smoothed out my skirt and... and...

Skirt?

There was nothing terribly interesting about my skirt. It was black—the same color as my tights. It came down nearly to my knees—or the knees I now had, because they certainly didn't look like the knees I remembered having before—not that I looked at my knees all that often. Even in my dumbfounded state, I soon realized I was looking at the lower half of a female body.

I reached out a hand to touch my skirt, praying that it was only an illusion. That was when I got the next shock. Not only was my hand small and slim, but as I watched, it darkened, the back of my hand becoming the color of coffee laced with a dash of cream. The nails were growing longer, then squaring off and turning a deep, glossy red.

"What's happening to me?" I cried out, gasping as my voice cracked, then rose an octave in the middle of my question. Officer Mercer continued to drive as if he hadn't even heard me.

Gods—gods ran Ovid; gods who had the power to control us, shape us, destroy us. The conversation with Pro had significant meaning now. My mind might have been confused and overloaded, but I had no doubt as to what was being done to me. I was being changed into a woman. Worse yet—I was being changed into a black woman!

My life on the road had become a day-to-day struggle for survival, but it was a life of my own making. I wasn't a woman. I wasn't black. I was a man—a white man—and I had no desire to be anything else, even if the black woman I was becoming was Vanessa Williams.

"Take me back to The Judge!" I screamed in my new, higher voice.

"Take me back. I don't want to be a woman! I don't... want..."

My voice broke down into a sob. I was crying hysterically as my chest rose and fell in gasps. I cried all the harder as I saw that with each

exhale, my chest still pushed out further swelling the dark red sweater I hadn't been wearing moments before with two substantial breasts. "Oh my God!" I wailed. Perhaps I should have said "gods."

I leaned against the door of the car, helpless as hair fell over my ears and down the back of my neck. There was a sudden tiny pinprick in my ear lobes—once, then twice in each lobe, and I could feel something small swinging back and forth from each new hole. My face felt different—not just in shape, but I could feel something slick on my lips. I touched them with my tongue, rewarded with a slightly sweet taste. I gathered my coat—my dark faux fur coat that hadn't been there before—tightly against my breasts, as if by squeezing them, I could make them go away.

Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the tingling stopped and new sensations flooded my transformed body. I could feel a bra harnessing my breasts. I could feel the gentle constriction of the black tights on my legs. I could feel the gentle sway of my long tresses as I shook my head back and forth in disbelief. I could feel... nothing between my legs.

"Oh my God!" I cried again as Officer Mercer brought the car to a halt.

Through building tears, I looked out at where we had stopped. We were in front of a large, one-story building made of tan brick. There was a flag flying in front next to a large wooden sign that proclaimed in black letters over a gold background, 'Ovid High School.' In smaller script, the black letters declared, 'Home of the Fighting Eagles!'

"Do you want me to go in with you?" Officer Mercer asked, speaking to me for the first time since my transformation had begun. There was no compassion in his voice, but no malice either.

"Go? Go where?" I managed to choke out.

"School, Marsha," he replied as if that had always been my name as he got out of the car and opened my door. "You can't miss school now, can you?"

Maybe I should have yelled, screamed and kicked my legs, but I did

none of those things. Instead, I reached out with an instinct which almost caused me to shudder and picked up the black leather purse which had suddenly appeared at my side. I wasn't even sure how I had known it was there. I demurely slid from the seat, making sure my skirt didn't hike up and balanced on the small block heels that I suddenly realized I was wearing. They weren't very high—only an inch or so I determined later, and somehow, my body knew how to perch on them and even walk in them without stumbling.

Why was I so cooperative? The answer was simple—I had come to believe what Pro had told me. This town was run by gods. I could think of no other description for them. And I had no doubt that this Officer Mercer was one of them. Police would have been bad enough to deal with, but gods were even less likely to tolerate disobedience. If they could turn me into a little black high school girl, what could they do to me if they got angry? That wasn't a pleasant thought and I chose not to test it.

"You're in Miss Samson's civics class right now," Officer Mercer told me as we entered the school. I felt almost a strange feeling of *déjà vu*, as I smelled the odor of the cleaning compound every school seemed to use and heard the sound of students in the classrooms excitedly talking before the final bell rang. A few students were hurrying into the classrooms. It was a reminder of my own high school days which I had nearly forgotten.

"Where do I go?" I asked, feeling the strange weight of breasts and wondering at the swinging movement of my hips. It all seemed so strange and yet somehow natural.

"First door on your right," he answered, pointing to an open door.

I looked back in fear as he waited until I had entered the classroom. He actually managed to give me what might have passed for a smile. "You'll be fine," he told me. "Just relax and let it happen."

Relax? I was in a strange body in a strange place and all I knew was that somehow, I had been changed into a young black girl named Marsha and I was supposed to relax? Gulping, I turned and entered

the classroom. I felt as if I had just stepped over a cliff.

“Marsha honey!”

I looked around the mostly full classroom, trying to avoid what appeared to be appreciative stares from some of the boys as I searched for the source of the greeting. Finally, I spotted her. She was grinning at me from a seat near the window. She was a very attractive black girl, dressed much as I was. She was also transparent.

There was an empty seat next to her, and I could tell she expected me to sit there. I supposed it was actually my–Marsha’s–seat, so I made my way to it, smiling and greeting several other students along the way. No one seemed to think there was anything odd about my being in the classroom. It was as if they had known me forever and expected me to be there.

“Girl, where is your notebook?” the black girl asked me as I plopped down quite unladylike in the seat.

“Notebook?”

“Here, take one of mine.” She thrust a florescent pink notebook in front of me along with a matching pen. “You know how Miss Samson is about expecting us to take notes.”

“Huh?”

She frowned at me. “Girl, you don’t sound right. Are you on your period or something?”

Period! Jesus H! I was a woman. I could actually have those... those... things now. Shit! Shit! Shit!

“All right class,” a woman’s voice called out from the doorway. I looked up to see a fiftyish woman walking primly to the front of the class. She wore a dress which made her look ten years older, especially with her gray hair pulled into a tight bun. This had to be Miss Samson, I thought.

It was, and class began with no nonsense, which I came to understand was Miss Sampson’s style. It was a surreal experience for

me. There I was, sitting attentively listening to this middle-aged woman droning on and on about the relationship of the states to the Federal government. I was back in high school for God's sakes. And to make even stranger, I was now a girl—a black girl no less. This just couldn't be happening, gods or no gods.

Now one thing I'd like to make clear; I never had anything against blacks. I wasn't too nuts about Mexicans because I saw them as taking work away from good Americans like me, but I had known a lot of blacks on the road. I just never, ever in my wildest dreams expected to be one of them. Looking down at my dark skin was almost as big a shock as looking at the breasts I now sported.

"You're new here, aren't you?" a boy's whispered voice came from behind me.

"How did you know?" I whispered back, frightened that I had somehow done something wrong to give myself away.

"I'll tell you after class," he replied softly, and I could sense him leaning back in his seat to a peevish glare from Miss Samson.

I wanted to take a look at my Samaritan but I didn't dare turn around. Miss Samson was watching me like a hawk, and I certainly didn't want to get detention. It was bad enough being turned into a little black high school girl without the embarrassment of having to stay after school as well. I just wanted to meld into the crowd until I could figure out what had happened and why and maybe do something about it.

At last, the class bell sounded and I was able to turn around. Grinning at me was a muscular and visually solid boy in a black and gold letter jacket. He was, I suppose, handsome, and it wasn't without some concern that I realized I was suddenly much more aware of boys' looks than I had ever been before. His hair was short and brown with just a little bit of curl to it. He was also white, and noting that made me all the more aware that I was not.

When everyone else was out of earshot, he said softly, "Welcome to Ovid."

“How... how do you know I just got here?” I asked.

“Marsha Henry used to be a shade,” he explained. When he saw the confusion on my face, he added, “I’m talking about the people you can see through. We call them shades here. But be careful. The shades don’t know they aren’t real, and neither do most of the other people around here.”

I was very relieved to have someone who knew the ropes and was obviously willing to help me. As we both rose to leave the classroom, I asked, “What do I do now? Where do I go?”

“We have the same afternoon class schedule,” he told me. “Just stick with me. But we’d better go by your locker and get your books. Spanish class is next and you’ll need your book. Miss... or rather Señora Sanchez doesn’t like it when we forget to bring our Spanish books to class.”

“But I don’t know my locker number!” I nearly cried from frustration.

“Look in your purse,” he suggested. “If you’re like most girls, you probably have it written down somewhere.”

He was right. It only took me a moment to find a little notebook inside my purse, and folded inside it was my class schedule and my locker combination and number.

“Is it like this for everyone?” I asked, my frustration showing. “Does everyone have to feel their way around in the dark trying to figure out what we’re supposed to be doing?”

“Pretty much,” he laughed, but I felt as if he was not laughing at me.

“By the way, I’m Pete Conway.”

“I’m...” Sticking out my hand, I realized my old name meant nothing now.

“You’re Marsha Henry,” he reminded me, not offering his own hand. I was afraid that meant he just didn’t want to shake hands with a black girl, but he quickly explained, “It would look a little funny for us to be shaking hands since I’ve supposedly known you since elementary school.”

“Oh, yeah,” I agreed, withdrawing my hand before anyone noticed.

Suddenly the bell rang.

“Shit!” Pete exclaimed. “Come on; we’ve only got a minute to get to class.”

We barely made it to class on time. Fortunately, Pete nodded to me to sit next to him toward the front of the classroom in what was apparently my assigned seat just before the final bell rang. The youngish woman with long wavy hair which spilled in soft, black curls over her shoulders glared at Pete and me as we found our seats. I guess she didn’t like it when students were almost late to class either.

Now I took Spanish many years ago when I was in high school, and I was pretty good at it. I even managed to use a little of it on the road. But there was no way I should have been able to keep up in a Spanish class—yet I did. It seemed if I just let myself go and floated along, I was able to understand what was being said in class. I even managed to answer a couple of questions. I began to realize when basking in the teacher’s smiles at my answers that I must be a fairly good Spanish student.

I began to wonder if it worked for other things as well. Maybe I could let myself go like that and... what? Do my hair and makeup? How could I even think about that? Maybe if I let myself go what would really happen is that I would lose myself. Maybe Bob Wallace would disappear mentally as well as physically and only Marsha Henry would be left.

I suppose no one ever thinks much about it, but no matter how bad a person’s life might be, I can’t think of too many folks who would be willing to completely lose their sense of being and become someone else. I might have had a little drinking problem, and life might not have been too sweet for me, but I didn’t want to forget I was ever Bob Wallace.

The funny thing is, I sort of sensed that a lot of people in Ovid had forgotten who they had been. Either that or they were mostly a terrific troupe of actors. Everyone in the classroom—solid or not—acted as if

he or she had been who they were now for their entire lives. And none of the transparent people seemed to notice there was anything wrong with being sort of transparent, and none of the solid students let on that they saw anything odd. Even Señora Sanchez was transparent, but the longer I listened to her in class, the more I found myself just thinking of her as just another person.

There was a subtlety to Ovid. I don't know how many changed people noticed it, but I did. Maybe it was because my mind was truly clear for the first time in years. It was as if a deaf person suddenly could hear sounds. Every little sound would be something to be savored, and I was doing a lot of savoring.

For one thing, as I sat there in class, I wondered why my stomach wasn't growling. After all, I hadn't eaten anything in the last twenty-four hours. Correction, I realized suddenly. Bob Wallace hadn't eaten in a day. Marsha Henry had probably eaten a bland but filling lunch in the high school cafeteria. My flat little stomach felt as if it had been filled right on schedule. Well, at least I hadn't been wrong about one thing. Getting picked up by the police had at least meant a warm meal for me.

I even managed to meet some of my other classmates that afternoon. Of course, they didn't know I was meeting them for the first time. One of them was Yolanda Montgomery. She was the black girl who sat next to me in civics and had a locker next to mine as it turned out. Even though she was a... what had Pete called them? Oh yes, a shade. Even though Yolanda was a shade, I found when she squeezed my arm in a friendly embrace that she felt as solid as anyone would.

Of the others I met, I liked two of them instantly. Trish Yamamoto and Jennifer Tilton were both cheerleaders, but they were not stereotypes of that breed. Both were real and both were pretty enough to be cheerleaders, but both were obviously very bright as well. When Pete and I nearly bumped into them after the last class of the day, they were engrossed in a paper they were writing for a physics class.

"Wait!" the Oriental girl said when she saw Pete and me. "Let's ask

Marsha. She's great at physics."

I was?

Then she looked at me closely. "Oops!" she chuckled.

"She just noticed you're real now," Pete whispered to me.

I found as I was introduced to the girls that everyone had become much more circumspect, speaking as if we had all known each other forever. Even the introductions were careful, not sounding like introductions at all but rather like greetings among old friends. Trish had obviously noted that there was something different about me. I wondered if the other girl—Jennifer—wasn't in on what had happened to us. Pete explained to me later how only two people could talk knowingly about Ovid. I discovered that Trish and Jennifer were as self aware as Pete and I were, but in a group, we could only chat like normal high school students.

"By the way, Pete," Jennifer said conspiratorially, "Carole Sue is looking for you."

Pete groaned while Trish and Jennifer laughed.

"Yeah," Trish added. "She wants you to wait for her after cheerleader practice tonight."

"Uh... don't tell her you saw me, okay?" Pete asked, his cheeks turning red.

"Don't worry," Jennifer assured him with a chuckle and a chummy squeeze of his arm. "We won't."

"Oh I don't know," Trish teased. "Shouldn't we cheerleaders all stick together? I mean, Carole Sue is one of us now." She struck a mocking cheerleader pose.

"Don't remind me," Jennifer grinned, shaking her head. "Besides, she's only on the squad because Dana Porter sprained her leg so badly. She'll have to try out for next year."

Trish and Jennifer waved goodbye to us, but as they walked away, I heard Jennifer say, "Let's just hope Carole Sue sprains her leg before

the tryouts.”

When they had left and a number of the students had already left the building, I asked, “What was all that about?”

“Carole Sue Wilcox,” Pete replied. From his tone, it was obvious he didn’t think much of her. “She’s a sophomore—her dad’s a prominent attorney here in town. He handles most of the good legal work. So little Carole Sue has grown up having everything she’s set her sights on. Right now, she’s set her sights on me.”

“A cheerleader? Cute, I suppose.”

“Downright beautiful.”

“And rich to boot,” I mused as I unconsciously picked just the right books to take home that night, stuffing them in my book bag.

“Right,” Pete agreed. “She’s rich and beautiful—and I can’t stand her.”

As we walked out of the building together, Pete explained how he had been fairly new to Ovid when Carole Sue took an interest in him. She was real, but had no memories of her previous life before Ovid. I was later to learn she was in the majority. Most transformed people had no memories of their previous lives.

Anyhow, Pete dated her from the beginning of the school year. Then, a couple of weeks ago, he dropped her.

“She was just becoming too possessive. Then when we broke up, she just hasn’t been able to accept it,” Pete explained rather tactfully. I knew what he meant. I had dated a girl in high school who went absolutely nuclear when I broke up with her. She had been too possessive, too, assuming that whatever she wanted, it would be up to me to provide it for her. And she hadn’t even been rich like Carole Sue apparently was.

“So who were you before Ovid?” I asked as we walked together. I felt strangely uncomfortable talking with Pete about his former girlfriend. I suppose it had something to do with being a girl myself now.

Pete shook his head. “It’s a bad idea to tell anyone who you were. It

creates complications.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” he went on, “take you for example. You probably weren’t black before, and maybe you weren’t even a girl. No, stop! Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. You see, that’s the problem with knowing who you were. Then I have to take that identity into account every time we talk. It’s better if you think I’ve always been a boy named Pete and you’ve always been a girl named Marsha.”

But I didn’t want to be a girl. Even being black didn’t bother me that much. There were plenty of black guys on the road, and some of them had gotten to be passing friends of mine. I didn’t mind them like I did the Mexes. After all, the blacks were at least not foreigners taking away decent jobs. And they spoke English. I suppose if The Judge had really wanted my number, he would have turned me into a sweet little Mexican girl with a thick Mexican accent. I wondered why he didn’t.

“So what’s all of this about—this Ovid?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “Nobody knows. You’ll figure out soon enough who The Judge and his cronies are.”

I didn’t let on that I already knew.

“Suffice it to say they leave us alone for the most part. I think there’s some big plan and Ovid is a part of it, but none of us can figure it out. When only two of us can discuss it at a time, it makes the exchange of ideas rather hard.”

“But you must have some idea of why we’re here,” I pressed.

“I do,” he agreed. “I think the whole town is something like an elaborate movie set. Did you ever see The Truman Show?”

“I never watched much TV,” I replied, unsure as to where he was going with all of this.

“It wasn’t a TV show,” he corrected me. “It was a movie about a TV show. In it, a TV network created a phony town somewhere in Florida

and wrote a script around a man who had no idea it wasn't real."

"Sounds a little contrived," I commented.

"I suppose," he allowed. "But the point of the whole movie dealt with how he coped when he found out what they had done to him. It was just too hard for the network to maintain the illusion they had created. But Ovid is more like a real town. I grew up in a town about this size, and I can tell you it's about as real as you could make it. What if Ovid was created to make someone—or several someones—think it was real?"

"But for what purpose?" I asked. "You think it's an alien TV show or something? Why would anyone go to this much trouble?" I wanted to ask how gods could go to this much trouble, but I didn't want him to know what Pro had told me. I was also getting the idea that speaking of the gods was a taboo.

"I don't know," Pete admitted. "All I know is that life here has been pretty pleasant—except for Carole Sue."

We both shared a laugh over that.

By the time we stopped, Pete had explained quite a bit about how Ovid operated. I now understood how the 'autopilot' worked. All I had to do is relax and I'd act just as Marsha Henry would normally act. I learned about how just leaving town wouldn't work since all roads led right back to Ovid. I learned that there were no cell phones and no cigarettes (gasp!). The lack of cell phones didn't bother me. I had never owned one. And as for the lack of cigarettes, the strange thing was that I didn't seem to crave one as I always had before.

"Well," he said at last. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah, you know—Thursday, school?"

"Oh." I looked around. "Is one of these houses mine?"

"That one right there." He pointed at an attractive two-story house, neatly landscaped with lots of trees and shrubs.

“It looks as if your mom isn’t home yet,” he commented.

“You know her car?” I asked. Then I noticed the closed garage door.

“How do you know her car isn’t in the garage?”

“Because she always leaves the garage door up.”

“You seem to know a lot about my mom’s habits,” I commented. I was smiling at the time but I was curious.

Pete just shrugged. “Marsha and I walk home together every now and then—particularly at this time of the year since I’m not on the basketball team. I just go out for football and track. Of course she was a shade before. You’ll find there’s really no difference between shades and real people. Some of them will be your friends.”

Like Yolanda, I thought.

“So, can I walk you to school tomorrow?” Pete asked.

“Oh! Sure. I guess.” I frowned. “Did you and the shade version of Marsha walk to school together as well?”

“Sometimes,” Pete told me. But the way he said it made it sound as if he hadn’t walked to school with her very often. I was probably somewhat different from the shade Marsha. Maybe I was more... interesting since I was a newcomer to Ovid. It couldn’t be anything else. I mean Pete was this really good-looking white guy and I was a black girl.

But I was a girl, I realized. And I had only gotten a glimpse of myself in the mirror in the girl’s restroom, but even that glimpse was enough to tell me that I was an attractive black girl. I wasn’t even all that black, really. I was sort of Janet Jackson black—features distinctly black but with skin light enough to declare that there had been a few whites in my genetic background.

Yes, I was a girl and Pete was a guy... I suddenly realized that I had thought of him not as just a guy but as a good-looking guy. Oh-oh...

As I waved goodbye and headed for the house, I began to realize my transformation might have been more than just a physical one. Now

as a man, I had been one-hundred percent heterosexual. The problem was that my years on the road in search of the perfect bottle had left my sexual impulses dulled to the point that I'm not certain my old self would have even been able to get it up for Miss America. In fact, the more I thought about it, I realized I hadn't even masturbated in years and as for having a woman... it had to have been seven or eight years at least.

As Marsha, I had not had my sexual senses dulled. Now the hormones of a young woman were flowing through my body, and my atrophied sexual condition as a male was no defense against them. My God, I had only been a girl a few hours and already I was noticing boys? I tried to imagine myself kissing one...

Yuck.

Okay, so maybe I was noticing them, but that didn't mean I was attracted to them, did it? I'd have to remain on guard, though. What if I went on autopilot while a boy was trying to grope me? I shuddered at the thought.

The front door of the house was unlocked. Well, it was a small town, I thought. And Pete had mentioned how Marsha's mom tended to leave the garage door open, so why bother locking the front door? Besides, who was going to break into your home when there were weird cops like Officer Mercer on the prowl?

I opened the door and stepped into the sort of living room that took me back to my childhood. I don't mean it was old-fashioned or anything like that. No, the furniture looked fairly stylish although some of the knickknacks had a distinctive African flavor to them. There was the sound of some rap song (if you could call a rap number a song) coming from upstairs. I doubted if it was something my new parents would play. Great, I thought. I've got a sibling. Just what I needed.

"Hey sis!"

The boy who called out to me was bigger than I was now, but I suspected he was actually younger. He was wearing jeans but no shirt. Like me, his skin was fairly light, and I had little doubt that I had

a 'baby' brother.

"Hey!" I replied. I couldn't very well call him by name since I had no idea what his name was. I watched him with fascination, though. He was a shade, and this was the first time I found myself alone with one of them. I knew from touching Yolanda at school that he would seem to be as solid as I was. It was odd how quickly a person could get used to something that at first appeared to be a somewhat insubstantial apparition.

"So how was school?" he asked as he shambled into the kitchen. If I were to answer him without yelling, I'd have to follow him. Since I had nothing better to do, I did so, watching as he opened the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of milk. He sniffed at it and then downed probably a pint of milk in one long swallow.

"School was okay," I replied noncommittally, wondering if 'mom' would have a fit if she saw him drinking milk directly from the carton like that.

"Oh! Mom called," he told me. "She said to go ahead and start dinner. She's going to be a few minutes late."

"Start dinner?"

"Yeah... hey, is something wrong with you. You look kinda pale."

Oh, of course not. Nothing was wrong at all. I had just been left in the body of a black teenage girl and thrust into a family I knew nothing about. Now I was expected to start dinner when I didn't even know what I was supposed to do. Starting dinner on the road usually consisted of heating a can of cheap stew over a small fire—or eating it cold if no fire was available. What the hell was I supposed to do now?

"I... I'm fine," I lied.

"Well girl, you sure as hell don't look fine. You having your time or something?"

"Time?" I must have paled even more when I realized he was talking about my period. He was the second person that day to ask me about that. Would I really be getting those now? Of course I would. Shit.

Could this thing get any worse?

Before either of us could say another word, I heard a rumbling sound. A garage door was going up and I could hear the sound of a car engine purring as it slowly entered what had to be the garage just beyond the kitchen.

"Sounds like mom's car," the boy muttered. "She's early. I gotta turn down my stereo. She hates this song."

He scrambled out of the room just as the door to the garage opened. I don't know what I expected 'mom' to look like, but the woman who entered was very attractive and professionally dressed. Like my 'brother' and me, her skin was fairly light and her features showed a mixed racial heritage. In my circumstances, I seldom had the opportunity to watch television, but I had caught an episode of a show called '24,' and the woman I was facing looked a little like the woman who played the candidate's wife, accentuated by the well-tailored blue suit and black heels she wore.

She started to speak and then stopped, staring at me. "Well hello," she finally said.

"Hello," I replied timidly. Just the way she looked at me, I was sure she realized I wasn't exactly the daughter she had said goodbye to that morning. I think one of the first things anyone learns when they come to Ovid is how to recognize whether or not someone they meet remembers their previous life. 'Mom' remembered, and she knew I was a newcomer.

"How are you coping?" she asked. The question was innocuous enough, but it was apparent she saw something in my eyes or my mannerisms to make her believe I hadn't lost my memories.

"Okay, I guess," I answered with a shrug. "It's all pretty new to me."

"Well, welcome to the Henry family," she grinned, laying a tan trench coat over one of the kitchen chairs. I thought for a moment she was going to try to give me a hug, but she kept her distance. She motioned with her head toward the stairs. The music wasn't as loud as it had

been, but it was still loud. "Have you met Jake?"

I could only nod.

"He's two years younger than you," she told me, confirming my suspicions. "Do you know about shades?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "Somebody at school told me about them."

"So you've been here most of the day," she surmised. "That's good. That will make things a little easier. Just so you'll know, your father has no memories of his past life, so we'll have to watch what we say around him and your brother. They think Ovid is just a normal small town."

"Okay."

She smiled at me. "You seem nervous. Don't be. Everybody here has had to go through what you're experiencing. The best thing to do is to just relax and let it happen. Pretty soon, your new life will seem perfectly natural to you."

I didn't think being a girl was ever going to seem natural, but I kept my mouth shut about that.

"We don't usually talk about our past lives around here," she went on, echoing Pete's admonition. "I'm not going to ask you about yours, even if I tell you about mine. If you ever want to tell me, though, I'll listen."

That was fine with me. I was more than a little embarrassed to find myself a minor, female, and black. It was sort of like winning the trifecta in hell. I certainly didn't feel like telling all of that to this woman who the gods had decided would now be my mother.

"It's a good thing my meeting got out earlier than I had expected," she explained. "I wanted you—or rather the shade you—to start dinner. But I'll take care of that now. I need for you to help me, though."

She turned to the refrigerator, opening it and pulling out several items. "Wash and peel these carrots," she ordered, placing a bag on the counter. "The peeler's in the first drawer to the right of the sink."

She busied herself with other tasks, expecting me to start without question. She was treating me like... like... her daughter, I realized. I was her child and expected to obey without asking why. I remembered how it had been when I was a teenage boy. Now I would have to go through all of that again.

I thought of rebelling. I thought of telling her that I was an adult and would make my own decisions. I didn't need someone telling me what to do and when to do it. But I realized suddenly that in the eyes of the world I was now a part of, I was not an adult. At most, I suppose, I was a 'young adult' and under the wing of my 'parents.' Since I already realized who ran Ovid, I could imagine what might happen if I rebelled. I might find myself back in the courtroom, this time leaving as a five-year old girl with fewer options than I now had. Resigned for the moment to my fate, I dutifully picked up the carrots and began to wash them.

As a boy, my kitchen duties had been mostly cleanup. As a girl, I found helping 'mom' to be a strangely enlightening experience. Since my lifestyle had never afforded me the opportunity to cook in a civilized fashion, I was mesmerized by the careful, sanitary preparation of boundless foods. We were having pork chops—stuffed pork chops no less—with mashed potatoes and glazed carrots and even a green salad. It was an abundance of food I knew only at the shelters on special occasions, such as Christmas or Thanksgiving. I found myself salivating like a dog seeing a steak. I quieted the rumbling my stomach had started, to make do with a few slices of carrot before 'mom' set them aside to be cooked in a mixture of brown sugar and butter.

She smiled at me as I munched on the carrots. "Hungry?"

"I haven't eaten in a while," I admitted sheepishly.

"Well, carrots are good for you." She just watched me for a moment and then commented, "You seem to be taking all of this pretty well. When I was transformed, I raised all sorts of hell."

"Well, I'm not too happy about being a girl," I admitted. There. That

was said. She now knew I used to be a man. I expected her to laugh, but she didn't, so I went on, "My life wasn't too easy. I have to admit that Marsha's life—my life now, I guess—looks to be a little better than the one I left behind—even if I do have to be a girl."

"Yeah, I guess the sex changes are the worst part of Ovid," she agreed. "I was always female, so not everyone changes sex. But I do understand a lot of the women in Ovid used to be men. They all learn to cope eventually."

All of them? I began to wonder again if they were given a little help in the coping department. Surely there were some former men out there who were furious every time they had to squat to go to the bathroom. I had known men who measured their importance by the length of their dicks. Maybe there was something in the water that caused them to calmly accept their magical castrations.

"You sound as if you're happy here now, though," I commented as we got back to work on dinner.

"Actually, I am," she admitted. "I've got a great family, a loving husband, and a job that takes me to the cutting edge of my field."

"What do you do?" I asked, genuinely curious. The idea of a small town like Ovid being on the cutting edge of anything surprised me.

"I'm an engineer at Vulman Industries," she explained. "I'm working on a project that... Well, I can't give you details. It's really hush-hush. But if it works, we'll really be able to change the world."

I was still curious, and her answer had actually heightened my interest, but I knew better than to quiz her more. I suspected she had already told me more than her superiors would have been happy with. So I changed the direction of the conversation just a little.

"Did they give you the engineering skills you needed when you came here?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "No, I guess it doesn't work like that. They can give you certain basic skills—like for example, if you just sort of let yourself go, you'll find you know how to do your hair and your makeup

just as if you'd always been a girl."

"I sort of figured that out."

"Good. Anyhow, professional skills require more discipline than they seem to be able to give us. I was an engineer with Boeing before I came here." She looked just a little wistful for a moment. "So was my husband—I mean my husband outside Ovid."

"Is he here, too?" I asked, sorry at once that I had asked. She looked so sad when she mentioned him.

"No... I was on a business trip to New Orleans. He stayed back in Seattle with our babies."

"You had children?"

"No!" she laughed. "I'm talking about our dogs—two golden retrievers. You see, I couldn't have children in that life. I suppose that's another reason I'm pretty happy here. I have you and Jake."

That made me feel sort of funny. It's hard to explain. Here was a woman I had never met before who considered me to be her daughter. I suppose if I was to prosper in Ovid, I'd have to act the part. Besides, except for Pete, 'mom' was the only person I had met who cared enough (or remembered enough) to help me out.

In a way, she made me feel like I hadn't felt in a long, long time. She made me feel safe. I hadn't felt safe since I had lost my own mother years ago. See, my mother was the person who held our family together. Dad was wrapped up in his career, and my one sibling, an older sister, was just like him—even including the drinking problem. But dad had a good job and managed to keep his drinking under control so that his superiors knew nothing about it. It was when he was home that he overindulged the most. Fortunately, he wasn't a vicious drunk; he was just a drunk.

Mom had been too late to see the developing signs of a drinking problem in my sister. Like my father, she had been a stealthy drunk. So was I, but mom had seen enough of the signs to realize that whatever genetic inclination to drink that ran through my father and

sister ran through me as well. She kept me sober through high school. It wasn't until college that everything fell apart. Free of her scrutiny, I quickly found that college could be a terrific place to drink and party. Of course, those who aren't careful find themselves drinking and partying right out of college. That was what happened to me.

Maybe I would have fled to the safety of my mother's arms if I could have, but by the time I flunked out, she was gone. Her heart gave out on her. I found out heart problems ran in her family, and her death was undoubtedly both natural and predictable. But I've always wondered in my more lucid moments if the failure of her family hadn't just broken her heart.

Now, I had a mother again. Of course I knew she wasn't exactly my real mother, but I saw in her the same instincts and emotions my own mother had. I only hoped this new mother of mine would not have to go through what my mother had experienced.

Not knowing what else to do, I just smiled at her remark and said, "Well, I guess I have homework to do."

She smiled sweetly. "Fine. Thanks for your help. You can study until dinner."

Finding my room wasn't difficult. I was relieved to find my room didn't share a wall with my 'brother' so I was somewhat isolated from the confusing rhythms of his hip-hop music. I hoped I wasn't expected to like it because I never would. Sighing as I closed the door to my room, I realized I was really alone for the first time since my transformation.

In some ways, life in Ovid was a definite improvement over my previous life, I thought to myself again. I seemed to be reminding myself of that often—usually when I looked down at my dark skin or felt the swirl of long hair or the gentle sway of my new breasts and the strange but not altogether unpleasant void between my legs. It was going to be difficult adjusting to my new race, sex and age, but at least I had the satisfaction of knowing I had been given a second chance... one in which I appeared to be a good student and reasonably popular. The future actually looked as if it might be promising—unless, of

course, I started drinking again.

It was odd, but when I thought about it, I hadn't felt the need for a drink since my transformation. I think it was the first time since I was eighteen or so that the craving for a drink had been a significant part of my life. Come to think of it, I had seen anyone smoking or drinking in Ovid. Maybe the gods had banned such things. If they had, I'd probably be better for it. Apparently, my new body had no need for such things, and it had done nothing to convince my mind otherwise.

I wondered as I studied, if my new body would also affect my mind when it came to sex. When a person drinks as much as I did, the need for sex seems to ebb. In fact, I was having a difficult time remembering the last time my male body had experienced an erection. Now, my body was young and female. Would I start to find men attractive?

I thought for a moment about Jake. He had been standing there in front of me in jeans with his chest bare. I knew some girls found that sexy, and I suspected Jake knew that, too. He wasn't a bad looking guy, I supposed, but I might have said that of him clinically when I was still male. Besides, he was supposed to be my brother now. What normal girl finds her brother to be sexy?

Then I thought about Pete. I had noticed when he introduced himself to me that he was attractive. There was no denying that. But was I attracted to him—I mean sexually attracted? I would have to say no. I was certainly drawn to him as a friend, but that wasn't the same thing, was it? Of course it wasn't.

'Dad' looked a lot like Jake. He was balding, sported a moustache, and had the beginnings of middle-age spread, but only a few pounds above fighting weight, but in spite of all of that he could never deny Jake. He hugged me warmly as I came down for dinner, and I had to remind myself that 'mom' had told me that he had no memories of his past life or I might have decked him for being so familiar. Thank God he didn't call me "princess." I think I would have thrown up.

Eating with my new family proved to be much more pleasant than I

had imagined it would be. My real family hadn't been as close. Dad often stayed late and drank his dinner with co-workers. My older sister was never around—usually out with her latest boyfriend drinking and screwing. As for my real mother, I think she just gave up on all of us and died fairly young—and I probably had something to do with her early death as well. So the closeness and affection the Henry family had for each other was both heart-warming and infectious. I found myself quickly participating in the family banter and enjoying every minute of it.

'Dad,' it turned out, was the Chief Engineer for someplace called Capta College. I had never heard of it, but I supposed it was one of those small liberal arts schools that dotted the country. Still, he managed a considerable staff of people and seemed happy with his job. I wondered idly if he had been an engineer before his transformation. 'Mom' had told me that we weren't given professional skills with our transformations, but maybe those who didn't remember their previous lives were not subject to that rule.

I managed to pick up from Jake that he was on the freshman basketball squad at school, but was taking a week or two off from practice due to knee strain. He also was apparently a good student as well, but from his complaints about his teachers' expectations, it became obvious that I was considered the brainy sibling.

"Ms. Potter is always wondering why I can't do as well in math as you did," Jake complained to me as he polished off a second plate complete with a second pork chop. I had no idea where his slender frame was stashing all of that food. I couldn't even finish one, in spite of the fact that it was great. "Your sister never had problems with this'," he mimicked, causing 'mom' to laugh.

"I think that's a little unfair," she commented. "After all, Marsha won an award for top math student when she was in ninth grade."

That was news to me. Actually though, as a boy, I had been the top math student in high school—until I started partying and drinking. I actually did have a pretty good mind for math, so I figured I have no problems maintaining Marsha's reputation—if I chose to.

All-in-all, I thought as I got ready for bed that night, my first day as a girl hadn't been all that bad. In a strange way, it was more 'normal' than the life I had been leading since my youth. My mind was clear—really clear—for the first time in years. And as for drinking...

I realized once again as I turned out the light that I hadn't had a drink since the night before with Pro. If I were still in my male body, I'd probably be shaking after being without a drink for that long. Did that mean I was no longer an... alcoholic?

There. I was able to admit it to myself at last. I had been an alcoholic. A wino. A sot. A drunk.

I tried to remember what a drink tasted like. Cheap wine, bourbon, scotch, gin, vodka, brandy... I couldn't place the taste. It was as if I had never experienced any of them. Perhaps I hadn't—or at least the person I now was hadn't. I wondered what something alcoholic would taste like in my new body.

Now, part of me was sending out warning signals. Alcoholism is probably equal parts of physical need, genetic predisposition, and mental derangement. I didn't need to worry about the physical need in this body. The need simply wasn't there. As for the genetic predisposition, I hadn't noticed my new parents needing a drink. 'Dad' looked from his developing waistline as if he might enjoy an occasional beer, but at dinner we just drank water or iced tea. But as for the mental...

I had to know. I wanted to know how this body would react to alcohol. If I didn't find out and had to spend the rest of my life as Marsha Henry, I needed to know if I could face my liquid demons and I had to know right now.

I sneaked out of bed, slipped on a robe and listened for activity outside my room. I had been studying late, to catch up on subjects I hadn't studied in years, so I had been the last in the family to go to bed. I confirmed my suspicions when I opened the door to complete darkness. I could even hear faint snoring coming from my parents' room.

I tiptoed down the hall and headed down the stairs and into the kitchen. Turning on the small light over the stove so I could see, I carefully inspected the cabinets. My life of drinking had taught me many things about where people tend to store their liquor. Even teetotallers often keep some in the kitchen for drinking guests. Almost everyone who doesn't have a home bar keeps their stock in the kitchen, often under or near the sink. I suppose that's so a person can pour a shot and dilute it with water (a terrible waste of water, my old self would have observed).

Yes, there it was—a lonely bottle of Jim Beam just under the sink. The bottle was nearly full, too. I didn't want to leave any evidence such as an empty glass, so I thought I'd take a shot directly out of the bottle. The bottle seemed heavier as I raised it—probably because of my weaker muscles as a girl.

I opted for a small swallow, letting the brown liquid wash onto my tongue and...

Oh God!

It felt as if my mouth had caught on fire, and the sweetish taste I had expected tasted like something out of the sewer. Coughing, I spit the foul liquid out into the sink, splashing water around the porcelain to wash away the evidence. Hurriedly, I replaced the bottle and shut off the light, rushing to my bathroom and grabbing for my toothbrush.

"Marsha, are you all right in there?" It was 'mom' and she sounded worried as she tapped on the bathroom door.

"I'm fine!" I managed as I used the brush to scrub the nasty taste from my tongue. "I just forgot to brush my teeth."

"Okay," she said uncertainly, but I hear her footsteps recede from the door. Had she known what I was up to? I doubted it. I only knew she wouldn't have to worry about me doing it again. I was certain that The Judge had made certain that I would never drink again. At least I had answered my own question. I need not fear ever falling into a bottle again.

When I awoke in the morning, my nipples were freezing. Like a fool, the night before I had luxuriated in my new opulence by putting on a pair of what appeared to be boxer shorts as my only nightwear. Since while on the road I mostly slept in my clothing, sleeping only in boxer shorts was reserved for those times when I was able to afford my own room. I had gone through the drawers before bed past all of the frilly nighties and feminine pajamas which I now seemed to own until I found a lightweight pair of summer weight pajamas with short bottoms that resembled boxers. Of course, they had no fly, and to my chagrin, they were pink, but they were the closest things to boxers I could find.

They had felt comfortable at first, but sometime during the night, I had apparently thrown back the covers (I wasn't used to sleeping in a warm room) and exposed my breasts. How was I to know that a girl's nipples could be so sensitive to cold? After all, given my lifestyle choices, there weren't many women in my life.

I was just slipping on my robe when I heard a knock at my door.
"Marsha, are you up yet?"

"Yes," I replied, not adding 'mom' since it was hard for me to think of her in that term.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure," I replied, wondering why she sounded so concerned.

'Mom' had a very worried look on her face. She was already dressed for work in a professional gray suit jacket and matching skirt. She looked fantastic, I thought. "Is something wrong?" I asked innocently.

She sat next to me on the bed. "Honey, when I got up this morning, there was an open cabinet door in the kitchen."

Shit! I thought. I had replaced the bottle but neglected to close the cabinet door.

"I want to know if you were in that cabinet last night."

The old me would have had no trouble lying about it. I had lied to my real mother so many times I had lost count. But that was the old me. The new me couldn't decide what to say, so I simply remained silent.

She put her hand on mine. "I want to tell you a story, Marsha. You know I told you I had been married before..."

I nodded silently.

"What I didn't tell you is that my husband was an alcoholic."

She went on to tell me how she met and fell in love with her husband-to-be and how they had nearly split over his drinking. At last, near the end of their freshman year, things came to a head. She had managed to keep him sober enough to stay in school, but she hadn't stopped his drinking completely.

"I finally told him he had to choose," she concluded. "It was going to be me or the booze."

"And he chose you," I surmised quietly.

She nodded. "It wasn't easy for him. I knew that. Be we were in love and I guess that was enough to tip the balance. Bob never took another drink. Now, you want to tell me about that cabinet?"

"Okay," I sighed. "I... I had a drinking problem, too. In my past life, I mean. I... I just had to see if... if..."

"If you still needed it?" she prompted.

"Yeah." I looked down. "I didn't need it, though. I didn't even need it when I went looking for it last night, but I had to know what it would do to me if I tried it. I found out I no longer was hooked on it. In fact, I couldn't stand it."

She patted my hand. "I've been given to understand that happens around Ovid. The Judge doesn't seem to like addicts of any kind. There's even a rumor he turned a drug dealer into a tree. I guess in your case, he decided to make sure you lost your taste for alcohol."

"That's what happened to me," I admitted. I was quiet for a moment, then looked at her. "Mom?" Somehow it didn't feel so unnatural to call her that for once.

"Yes?"

"I'm... I'm sorry."

She gave me a hug. I noticed there were tears in her eyes. Come to think of it, there were tears in my eyes as well. "You'd better come downstairs," she said, her voice trembling. "Breakfast is almost ready."

"Okay." I returned her sudden smile. Then something struck me as she was leaving. "Mom?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Where did you go to school? I mean where did you really go to school before Ovid?"

"The University of Illinois," she told me as she left.

Bob? University of Illinois? No, it couldn't be. There had to be a lot of guys named Bob at the University of Illinois, and a certain percentage of them had drinking problems. But as I remembered mathematical set and union theory, I realized there were a lot of coincidences here.

But how could that be? I wondered as I dressed for the day in a knit sweater and jeans. I never knew anyone like her in my brief college life. I would have remembered.

Or would I?

'How could a town like Ovid remain secret?' I reasoned. Unless those captured and transformed were somehow removed from reality outside Ovid. Could even gods do such a thing? I thought back on memories of reading the myths as a child. Come to think of it, the gods could steal memories. It was a common theme. But were they taking memories or actually reshaping reality as blithely as they had reshaped my body? How could I ever know?

Was it possible, I wondered as I silently ate breakfast, I was the Bob she was referring to? It would mean that when this woman who was now my mother had been taken on her business trip and transformed, everyone who ever knew her would find their lives changed. It would mean that a stern lover hadn't been there to save me from myself, causing me to fall into the bottle and ruin my life.

Then I remembered something my attorney had mentioned in court. She had told The Judge that he bore some responsibility for my situation. Was this what she was referring to? Did she mean that I had become a drunk and a drifter because of something The Judge had done—like transforming my wife into a black wife and mother in Ovid?

I was still thinking about that as I stepped out into the chilly morning air to start my walk to school. My thoughts were interrupted when I spotted a friendly face. “Pete! What are you doing standing in front of my house?”

He grinned, his cheeks a bright red indicating that he had been standing there for some time. “I thought you might like someone to walk to school with, remember? You know, to get you to the right classes and all.”

“I have my class schedule in my book bag,” I told him. I realized I was grinning, too, and had said it just like a girl would.

He just shrugged. “Well, let’s just say I get lonesome walking to school by myself.”

We started walking together, and I asked, “Didn’t you say Marsha walked to school with you before?”

“Sometimes,” he said with a little blush. “Well, not really, I guess. She was always sort of...”

“Stuck up?”

“No, not that. She had a boyfriend...”

Uh-oh.

“...but she dumped him a couple of weeks ago.”

Whew!

“He’s on the basketball team—Nate Daniels.”

I tried to remember all the students I had spoken to the day before. “Isn’t he that big black guy in the letter jacket—the guy with the real short hair? The shade?”

“That’s him.”

There weren’t that many black students in Ovid, so I had certainly been aware of him, especially since he seemed to be very interested in me. Maybe this was why. Maybe he wanted to get back together with Marsha. Well, that just wasn’t going to happen. I might be a black girl now but that didn’t mean I was interested in black guys—or any guys of any color for that matter.

So we just talked on our way to school. Pete was great at coaching me. He told me more about the people who were supposed to be my friends. I was actually surprised how much he knew about Marsha’s life, but I supposed they had talked together walking home from school. By the time we got to school, I felt confident I’d be able to fake my way through the day. I found myself regretting that he and I didn’t have the same classes first thing, but he walked me to my locker and made sure I knew how to find my first classes. It was right after he left me to go to his own locker that I saw someone I never expected to see again.

It was Pro.

He was dressed in a drab gray work shirt and matching pants, and he had with him the badges of custodians everywhere—a push broom and a large set of keys swaying from his belt. I had just caught a glimpse of him as he turned a corner, but I was sure it was he. I started to follow him.

“Hey, girl!”

I turned to see Yolanda standing there along with another black girl—a real one. “Where are you off to? Chemistry is this way.”

“Uh... yeah,” I managed with one more glance down the hall. I’d have to find Pro later. If he was really a custodian at the school, I should have no trouble finding him.

Or so I thought. I had a free period right after Chem class, but I couldn’t use it to look for him. I found out when questioned by one of the staff that I needed a hall pass to be wandering around during class

periods. I couldn't believe it! When I was in high school as a boy, we were free to roam anywhere—even off campus—if we didn't have a class.

So I decided I'd use the free period to learn more about the gods and about Pro. Yes, I suspected he was a god himself, so I should be able to find something on him in the school library. It was simple really. In no time at all, I had him identified as Prometheus. The clues were there—the magical fire and the scar where an eagle had burrowed in to eat his liver as it continually reconstituted itself. Ironically, he had been freed by Hercules—the son of Jupiter.

Armed with this new information, I started back down the hall to my study desk. Imagine my surprise when I saw Pro standing just a few feet away in the middle of the hall as I turned the corner. He smiled at me. "So now you know who I am."

"Yes," I replied calmly. "You're Pro... Pro..."

"Don't try to say it," he warned. "You can't say our names—at least not in the context you were about to use."

"But you're working with The Judge?" I asked. "After what he did to you?"

The smile became a little less wide. "That's a subject for another day, Ms. Henry."

Before I could reply, the period bell rang and students began pouring out into the hall. "Look, shouldn't we go someplace a little more private?"

He raised an eyebrow. "A pretty coed meeting in private with a custodian? Ms. Henry, what would everyone say?" Before I could respond, he laughed, "Don't worry. No one can see us right now."

"Huh? Why not?"

"Think about it, Ms. Henry—or may I call you Marsha? Good. Think about it, Marsha. There are certain people who are never seen unless they want to be seen—janitors, bus boys, shelf stockers, and others like that. I've simply amplified that power so that you and I can carry

on a private conversation right here.”

He was right. Students scurried past us as if we weren’t even there. None of them obviously dodged us, but instead naturally avoided us.

“Okay,” I sighed. “Just tell me what’s going on.”

“To do that would take more than the break between classes,” he mused. He waved his hand and I noticed the activity around us slowing down to an almost imperceptible pace. “There. That’s better.”

“How did you do that?” I gasped. Everyone was still moving, but very, very slowly.

“Many of us can do it,” he replied with no little pride. “Mercury, of course, is the best at it. The rest of us can only do it for a few minutes without getting extremely tired, but he can do it almost all the time.”

“You were going to tell me what was going on,” I prompted.

“Was I? Oh, I suppose I was. Although there’s not much to tell I haven’t already told you.”

I sighed, “Pro, stop playing games. You knew what was going to happen to me when I got to Ovid, and you did nothing to stop it. You’re working with Jup... The Judge and his crew. You’ve all set up some sort of a weird Olympian ant farm here with people like me as the ants. I want to know why.”

“So do I,” he said seriously.

“Excuse me?”

He put a familiar hand on my shoulder. “Look Marsha, I know you’re upset. I understand. I didn’t tell you what was in store for you because I needed someone here I could work with. And you’re wrong about me. I’m not working with my cousin and his ‘crew’ as you called them. I’m as curious to know what’s going on as you are.”

“But you know some things I don’t know,” I pointed out.

His hand dropped to his side. “Yes, that’s true. I’ll tell you what. I’ll answer your questions now if you’ll help me.”

I looked at him suspiciously. “No, you answer my questions and then I’ll decide if I should help you or not.”

He shrugged, defeated. “Very well. But we only have a few minutes. As I told you, slowing down time like this can be very tiring, and besides, I don’t want to take the chance of one of my cousin’s cohorts noticing I’ve done it.”

I nodded. “Okay. First of all is my new mother really my wife?”

“She was,” he corrected me. “You see, when they remove someone from reality, there’s a reaction. It’s not always entirely predictable, but the Oracle determines who should be removed based upon the effect a person’s removal would have on the future rather than the effect upon the past. The past has a way of correcting itself, sort of like the way a rock dropped in a stream just moves the water around it. The water ends up in the same place but uses a slightly different path.”

“So in my case, my wife’s removal meant that I never met her and there was no one to stop my descent into alcoholism.”

“That’s right.”

“So The Judge is responsible for what I became,” I surmised.

Pro shook his head. “No, only you are responsible for what you became. Time would have been content if you had managed to straighten yourself out without your wife’s help. In fact, time would have preferred that. Your wife nurtured you and brought out the best in you, but ultimately only you are responsible for the use or misuse of your life.”

It was a stinging rebuke. Since mom had told me things that made me realize she had once been my wife, I had been angry at The Judge for ruining my life. Pro was right, though. My wife might have given me the reason to stop drinking, but only I was responsible for my actions.

“But is our former relationship the reason I’m her daughter now?” I finally asked.

“Partially,” Pro agreed, “but not entirely. The Oracle recommends new residents for Ovid based on need, and don’t ask me what that need is.

I'm in the dark on that as well. I would imagine your previous experience with the woman who was transformed into your mother was part of what determined your identity here. Ultimately, The Judge decided whether or not to follow the Oracle's advice. The fact that you became a black person might have resulted from prejudices in your other life."

"But..." I started to say that I had never considered myself prejudiced against blacks. But then I remembered how I had developed a low opinion of Mexicans since they were unexpected competition for the low-paying jobs I felt I was entitled to. It was a selective form of prejudice but prejudice nonetheless.

"Yes," Pro smiled, "you can see it, can't you? As for being a girl, that is the most common change in Ovid—a change of sex. You see, few women are selected to be transformed because of the difficulty of getting them to Ovid. Unlike your male self, few women ride the rails, and few travel alone on the back roads that can lead them to Ovid. Therefore, a number of men must be made into women. I think it also gives former men a broader view of life, don't you?"

I refused to be drawn into a debate about that. "So why is Ovid here?" I asked. "Surely the gods don't need us just for entertainment."

"You're right about that, Marsha. All I can do is tell you a little of the history of Ovid, and then maybe you'll understand.

"You see, until a few decades ago, we gods were wanderers. Some still are. There are pockets of forgotten gods of any number of pantheons spread all over the world. Would you believe there is even a colony of gods in Greenwich Village? Anyhow, an event happened at the close of World War Two which changed that for some of us."

It wasn't too hard to guess. "The atomic bomb?"

He nodded. "Yes. We hadn't anticipated it. We no longer paid attention to our own oracles. We were too busy roaming the Earth and living as we pleased, sampling the best humanity had to offer while avoiding all of the responsibility. Then, the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. There were three known gods in the city when the bomb

was dropped. Don't bother asking their names; they were minor Oriental deities whose names would mean nothing to you."

He stopped for a moment, pain in his eyes. "Can you possibly understand what it means for Immortals to learn that they can be destroyed after all?"

I shook my head, sensing the horror of his memories.

"We really thought we could not be killed—at least not unwillingly. Charon, of course, added his immortality to my own so he could die, but that is rare. It constitutes in our eyes a form of suicide which is unhealthy in any culture. Even when we do die though, we still exist on other planes. We can... sense each other when that happens. Oh, we can be hurt sometimes. Look at what was done to me, though, and yet I didn't die. In fact, when Hercules freed me, I healed almost at once.

"But when the bomb was dropped, its power tore into the very fabric of the universe. Our brethren were vaporized along with everything else. How can even a supposedly immortal being survive when the very atoms of his body are shattered in the heat and power of a nuclear explosion?"

I thought I could understand how mentally painful it might be. Mankind grows up with the idea that life on Earth is both fragile and finite. As we get older, we become more and more aware of that fact. Besides, we have our beliefs in a belief in the afterlife. How must it be for a god, though? What a shock it must have been for all of them to find that they were vulnerable after all. I didn't ask Pro if the other gods were able to reach their fallen kin on another plane. I was afraid the answer would be no. Whatever afterlife they experienced was probably swept away by the nuclear explosion.

"So how does all of this explain Ovid?" I asked at last.

Pro brightened a little, happy to have told the worst of his story. "Ovid was founded a few years later by... The Judge and a few of his favorites. The word is he has a plan to make certain nothing like what happened in Japan ever happens again. Ovid is the physical

manifestation of that plan.”

“But I don’t understand,” I pressed. “How can a small farm town in the heart of the country be of such importance?”

“I don’t know,” Pro said sadly, shaking his head.

“Then why not ask him? After all, you’re a god, too, aren’t you?” I pointed out.

“Yes, in the broadest sense I am,” he admitted. “The problem is that not all the gods are important enough or trustworthy enough to be involved. Some of us panicked, forming a group known as ‘The Others.’ They thought The Judge and his followers were interfering in something that could only be made worse. They sought to release the Titans to bring my cousin and his supporters back under control. They failed.”

“You mean you failed,” I broke in. “You were one of The Others, weren’t you?”

“You know, you’re really quite perceptive,” he chuckled. “When we met on that boxcar while your mind was so damaged by liquor, I had no idea you were so bright. Yes, I was with The Others. They still operate, but many of us became disillusioned with them as well. Their plan was to do nothing—other than exposing the Earth to the rule of the Titans. I can assure you, Marsha, that would not be in Mankind’s best interests. I’m aware of that now.

“I represent another group now, Marsha—one that would be willing to help The Judge if we could be assured that he is right.”

“And what if you decide he isn’t right?”

“Then we’ll fight him.”

“So why do you need me?”

Pro grinned. “Yes, you really are perceptive. We need you to gather information for us—information you will come into possession of if my ability to see the future is correct.”

I wanted to ask how he knew and what the information was, but first

there was something else I needed to know. “So what’s in it for me?”

“The opportunity to be a man once more,” Pro replied simply. When I said nothing, he continued, “It can be done, you know. Not only The Judge has the ability to alter your form. Others among us can do so as well.”

“What if I don’t want to be a man again?” I asked carefully. In fact, I wouldn’t mind being a man again, but given the choice of being a man like I had been before or being Marsha Henry, Marsha was the lesser of two evils.

Pro looked around. “Marsha, I can’t hold back time any further. We’ll talk another time. I’ll answer the rest of your questions then. Please understand, though, that we need your help.”

“But...” I began, but time abruptly continued its normal speed. I was suddenly assaulted by the cacophony of dozens of conversations. I had to weave and swerve to avoid being run over by students who were only now aware of me. One actually did bump into me. It was a girl—about my size. But unlike me, her skin was pale and her hair was long and blonde. She would have been very, very attractive if it had not been for the sneer on her face as she looked at me. Finally, she dodged around me.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked, not realizing I had said it out loud.

“Maybe she’s pissed about you and Pete.”

I looked around to see Trish Yamamoto grinning at me. At her side was Jennifer Tilton with a matching grin. Trish turned to Jennifer. “You go on. I need to talk to Marsha.”

I realized what she meant. It wasn’t that Trish had something to tell me that she didn’t want Jennifer to hear. It was simply that only two of us could discuss some things without being in violation of the gods’ rules.

“I’ll walk you to class,” Trish said. “We’ve both got math next period.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “I assume the blonde who just gave me the evil eye is what you want to talk about.”

“You got it.” Trish grinned that impish grin once more. “That was Carole Sue Wilcox.”

“Of course,” I muttered as we walked along. “And she thinks I’m out to steal Pete from her?”

“Right in one.”

“But Pete and I aren’t... like that!” I protested with a laugh. “We’re just friends. I mean, I just got here and all. Besides, I used to be a guy.”

“So was I,” Trish admitted, “but you’ll find that doesn’t count for much around here. Carole Sue is one of those transformees who doesn’t remember who she was before Ovid. Who knows? Maybe she was a guy, too. It’s not uncommon. But the point is that she thinks she’s always been a girl, and as Carole Sue Wilcox, she’s used to having her way. No guy has ever dumped her, but she’s dumped a few guys. Then along came Pete.”

“But I get the idea Pete isn’t even dating her—at least not anymore,” I protested. “What business is it of hers anyway?”

“You don’t know Carole Sue,” Trish laughed. “She’s beautiful and she’s rich. Some girls think when they have that combination everything is their business. Pete dumped her and that doesn’t sit well with her at all. She probably even thinks you’re the reason Pete dumped her.”

“Well you can tell your friend she’s got nothing to worry about,” I told her. “Pete is just helping me through this... transition. We’re just friends. If she wants to date Pete, that’s no problem.”

Actually, I wasn’t exactly telling the truth there. It wasn’t that I wanted to date Pete. I might be adapting all right to being a girl, but the thought of dating a guy just didn’t sit well with me. The problem I had was caving in to a bitch like Carole Sue Wilcox. Here we hadn’t even said a word to each other and I already disliked her. I didn’t realize it at the time, but it was a pretty feminine reaction.

“Well, Marsha,” Trish replied quietly, “the problem is that Pete doesn’t want to date her.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Maybe that was part of the reason Pete was hanging around with me, I thought. I was camouflage. Being new to Ovid, I wouldn't want to be attached to him, but I would keep girls like Carole Sue away from him. I wondered why he wasn't interested in Carole Sue any more. She was attractive and her family had money. When I was a guy, I would have found that to be a winning combination. Of course it was pretty obvious she was something of a bitch, but a guy like Pete had the balls to keep her under control, sort of like Petruchio in *Taming of the Shrew*. Come to think of it, even the names were similar.

“Look, Marsha, some of us girls are getting together tomorrow to do some girl stuff. You want to join us?”

“Well...”

“Don't worry. Carole Sue won't be with us.”

I needed to get to know my fellow students better, I realized. I finally nodded. “Okay.”

“Great!” There was that grin again. “I'll call you later and set things up.”

We ducked into math class just as the bell rang.

I had studied my butt off the night before to be ready for all of Marsha's classes, but math was something I didn't need to spend much time on. Back in the days before drinking had dulled my mind, I had a natural talent for math, and now that I was working with a brain undamaged by booze, I found it all came back to me quickly. That was fortunate, because it turned out Marsha had the reputation of being a math whiz.

The rest of the day went smoothly as well. Other than almost stepping into the boys' room once, I didn't make any obvious goofs. I was finding that Marsha Henry had a 'good girl' reputation, was a top student, and was reasonably popular—or as popular as a black girl could be in a mostly white school.

I suppose I should address the black-white issue, though. Ovid might

have been created by the gods, but they did nothing to change human nature. Oklahoma borders three states that were once slave states. Two of them even seceded in the Civil War. So attitudes in Oklahoma can be just a little bit Southern at times. This meant that while blacks and whites got along pretty well with each other, there wasn't a lot of interracial social activity—at least with the shades and those who had no memories of previous lives.

I think the reason those of us who were transformed and remembered who we had been were more color blind is that we had personal experience in realizing that we're all pretty much the same inside. I thought of myself only as being black when someone else considered me black. It was the same with being a girl. The rest of the time, I was just... me.

As I prepared to walk home from school that day, I had one of those moments where I had no choice but to consider myself black. Pete and I planned to walk home again together, but as I started to approach Pete after school, I was warned off by a glance from one of the black guys from the basketball team. He, along with two other black basketball players was having a heated discussion with Pete. I hung around in the hall, just out of earshot, pretending to sort through my locker until they were finished. Then Pete joined me.

"What was that all about?" I asked as I shut my locker door.

Pete just shrugged. "They're friends of Nate Daniels. They wanted to let me know that Nate is still interested in you."

"Then why did they come to you?" I asked. "Why didn't they come directly to me?"

Pete looked a little embarrassed. "Well, they've seen the two of us together. I guess they just thought... you know."

Yeah. I knew. I had just forgotten how rumors got started in high school. All you had to do was be seen together in public and half the student body figured you were sleeping together. Well, let them think what they wanted, I thought. Pete had befriended me during my first hours as Marsha. He was the sort of guy I would have wanted as my

friend when I was male and I saw no reason to change my taste in friends.

“What did you tell them?” I asked quietly.

“That they should talk to you about it,” Pete said frankly. “I told them we were just friends.”

“And they believed you?”

He shook his head. “No. I’m sorry, Marsha. I shouldn’t have gotten you into this trouble. I remember how it was when I was in high school—before Ovid, I mean.”

“Yeah, so do I,” I told him. “But this really pisses me off. Where do they get off telling us who we can be friends with? Come on, let’s start for home.”

“You... you still want to walk with me?”

“Sure.” Then I added cautiously, “That is unless you don’t want to be seen with me...”

“My God, no!” Pete blurted. “Let’s go.”

We were both fairly quiet on the way home. Pete would say something requiring an answer, and I would reply in terse one or two word replies. Then, after a few moments, I’d say something and it would be Pete who responded with short replies. No, we weren’t angry at each other. Rather, we were both just trying to figure out exactly what our relationship was. I wasn’t used to being a girl yet, and the idea that Pete might be hitting on me did cross my mind. As for Pete, having an interest in a girl of a different race probably required some thought. I tried to imagine what my parents would have said if I had brought home a black girlfriend. Yes, times have changed, but interracial dating is still not all that common—especially in small towns.

I stopped for a moment in front of my house to wish Pete a good weekend, but before I could, he asked, “Hey you want to go to a movie tonight and maybe get a pizza?”

My mouth dropped open in shock. “Pete? Are you asking me out on a

date?”

He blushed. It was a good thing that my dark skin had disguised the fact that I was blushing, too. “Well, no—not really. I mean... well, sort of, I guess...”

He was starting to sound like Jimmy Stewart hemming and hawing like that. I couldn’t resist having a little fun at his expense.

“Well? Are you or aren’t you asking me out on a date?” My hands were on my hips by then.

“Well... I guess so,” he admitted at last. “I mean, friends can date, can’t they? It doesn’t mean we’re serious about each other or anything like that. I mean, we’re just friends, right? What do you say? I’ve already got permission to use dad’s car...”

There it was. He had been planning to ask me out—even getting use of his father’s car. Then Nate’s friends had cornered him and he started having second thoughts. I had been wrestling with the whole idea of being a girl as we walked home; he had been wrestling with whether or not asking me out was such a good idea.

“Okay, Pete,” I laughed. “But just as friends, okay?”

He managed a weak grin. “Okay. Six o’clock? We can grab a pizza and then go to the new James Bond flick.”

They were still making James Bond movies? Gee, I had been out of touch. Of course, my entertainment budget as a bum wasn’t very high. “Sure. Six will be great.”

Mom had just gotten home as well. I found out later she had a very flexible working schedule at Vulman which was great for the family. I think she also wanted to make sure she was home for me when I got out of school. Like everyone who retained their old memories, she must have realized how difficult the first few days in Ovid would be for a newcomer. She was watching Pete walk away from the living room window. “Was that Pete Conway you were talking to?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I answered, pulling off my backpack. “He’s a good guy. Do you know him?”

“His father works at Vulman,” she told me as she stepped out of her heels. “He’s Personnel Director. Trisha Harris works for him... Oh, that’s right. You haven’t met Trisha yet.”

“He asked me to go to the movies with him tonight,” I said as matter-of-factly as I could.

“And you told him...?”

“I told him yes.”

“Shouldn’t you check with me first?” she asked carefully.

“Why? Oh, I see what you mean. I’m what—sixteen? Do I have a curfew, too?” I asked this as lightly as I could. Mom didn’t know I had been an adult, and she certainly had no idea I had been her husband. That was ironic. She remembered the old me but had no idea that I had been Bob Wallace. I, on the other hand, knew that she had been my wife but had no memories of her. Now I had to somehow develop a mother-daughter relationship with her. Weird.

“Well, I always asked Marsha to be home by eleven...”

“I’ve got no problem with that,” I assured her. “I’ll just ask him to bring me home right after the movie.”

“But Marsha, he’s...” She was having trouble saying something.

“He’s what? A known sexual offender? A child molester?”

“No, Marsha, he’s white,” she blurted out quickly.

“Wait a minute,” I said, sitting down while I studied the stricken look on mom’s face. “I’m not real clear on this whole black-white thing. I thought it was okay to have interracial dating these days. Did I miss something?”

“Well, no one will stop you,” she admitted, sitting down next to me.

“And the... the people who run Ovid would never stand for open prejudices. It’s just that... well, look around you. All your friends are black.”

This probably wasn’t the time to tell her I had agreed to a shopping

excursion with a white girl and an Oriental girl.

“You... that is, Marsha always dated black boys and your brother dates black girls.”

“But we’re just friends,” I tried to explain. “My God, I’ve only been a girl for a day. I’m not about to swap saliva with boys. I may never get serious about them. Besides, what’s the big deal? I used to be white and you used to be white...”

She frowned. “How did you know that? I never told you what race I was before Ovid.”

Oops.

“Well, I just assumed,” I recovered quickly. “From what I’ve heard, The Judge likes to mix things up a bit—making whites into blacks and men into women.”

She relaxed a little bit. Good. I wasn’t ready to deal with our former relationship just then. “Well, I suppose it won’t hurt,” she said slowly. “Maybe I am overreacting just a little. But don’t tell your father. He gets upset about that sort of thing. He’s sort of old-fashioned...”

Was she telling me he was prejudiced? This was an interesting perspective for me. Having grown up white in a fairly typical Midwestern home, I knew that people like my real parents were all for civil rights, but if my sister or I had brought home a black date, they would have been quite uncomfortable. I never realized the same could be true of black families.

I decided rather than upset my new father, I’d just make myself scarce. Mom would tell him I was going out with some friends. By the time Pete arrived to pick me up, dad was already sitting in the den, a pre-dinner beer in hand while he watched the news on TV. I was able to slip out the door without causing a fuss.

“You look really great tonight,” Pete told me with an appreciative inspection as we walked to his car.

I hoped I hadn’t overdone it. I wasn’t up on what girls wore out for a pizza and a movie. I assumed jeans and a sweater would do it, but

somehow, that didn't seem right. I had tried on three or four outfits. I don't know why I was so indecisive. Maybe it was because girls just seemed to have so many clothing choices and I wanted to look... right. I ended up wearing a nice conservative dark gray wool skirt and a black pullover sweater. I wore black tights with the outfit since I knew from the day of my transformation that they looked nice. I found a pair of black flats that in spite of the name had just the hint of a heel, but nothing I couldn't handle.

Mom had helped me with the jewelry—just a simple gold necklace and bracelet really—and had reminded me to carry a black purse. It was one of the few times I had carried one, since my backpack had sufficed before. I just hoped I didn't leave it somewhere since I wasn't used to carrying it.

I had actually done my makeup by myself. Mom had reminded me that evening makeup could be a little bolder. I just shrugged and let my autopilot take over. The result was something I could live with. I had to admit I was a good-looking girl.

Pete and I didn't say much to each other in the car. I think it was because both of us had become suddenly aware that no matter what we called this little social experience, it was a date between a boy and a girl, and I (gulp!) was the girl. It was an uncomfortable feeling for me, being a young girl. Actually, I think it would have been almost as uncomfortable if I had been a young boy. As Bob Wallace, drunk about town and itinerant laborer, I hadn't had much of an opportunity to date. Alcohol seems to take away sexual attractiveness and sexual desire in equal measure—at least in the quantities I consumed. I hadn't had a real date as a man since college.

In all honesty, though, sitting there in the car next to Pete wasn't an unpleasant experience. He was a friend—a good friend—and I hadn't had one of those in many years. Plus Pete was a guy I was sure could take care of himself—and me. One thing I had already noticed about being a girl is how nearly every male looks bigger and stronger. It felt good to know that if I needed protecting, Pete was big enough to do the job.

I got a little concerned when Pete turned off Main Street toward a darker side street, but I was relieved when I saw a green and white neon sign in the middle of a window framed by red neon. 'Tony's Real Italian Pizzeria' the sign declared, and from the small crowd of patrons carrying take-out sacks and boxes, I had to admit Tony was doing a thriving business. I wondered if we'd be able to find a table.

"It's still a little early for the eat-in crowd," Pete told me, reading my expression of concern. "A lot of these cars are here for takeout. Besides, the place is bigger than it looks."

Pete was right about that. Although the front of the store was fairly small, the restaurant was deep and well lit, with the usual cheap tables covered in red and white checkered tablecloths held in place by empty Chianti bottles. I suppose by city standards, it wasn't much of a place, but I nearly choked up thinking about how long it had been since I had been in an eating establishment anywhere near as nice as this one.

We weren't the only teens in the place, and I was a little taken aback by the glances we were getting. While there were both whites and blacks in the dining room, there was not a single table where whites and blacks were dining together.

"Pete!"

Both of us looked around. I spotted Trish sitting at a table with a tall, slender boy wearing glasses. Both of them were motioning us over. "You guys want to join us?" the boy called out.

Maybe under other circumstances, I might have said no, but the looks Pete and I had been getting were just uncomfortable enough to make Trish's table look like a safe haven. In numbers there is strength. Besides, even though I didn't know the guy she was with, he looked safe enough, and if he was a friend of Pete's, he could be a friend of mine.

"Luke, call for a waiter," Trish prompted as we sat down. One would have come on his own, but I knew Trish was just prompting me with the boy's name. I got the idea I was expected to know him.

“Hey, Marsha,” Luke said with a friendly grin.

“Hey, Luke,” I said with a grin of my own while Trish smiled in approval.

“You guys going to the flick?” Luke asked.

“Yeah,” Pete replied as the waiter took our drink order. It turned out that they hadn’t ordered food yet, so we all agreed to share a Tony’s Special—whatever that was.

“I’m really looking forward to this Bond picture,” Luke explained enthusiastically.

“Boys and their toys,” Trish sighed. “Another Bond-fighting-evil-Orientals flick.”

Given my own color, I could see how Trish might be a little sensitive about that. I think I would have felt the same way if we were going to see a flick where all the blacks sounded tough and ignorant. It was funny how sensitive one could get to things like that so quickly.

“Hey, Bond fights white guys, too,” Luke argued. “And there are a lot of Oriental good guys, too.”

This started an impassioned discussion about the portrayal of other races in the movies. I mostly just listened, since I hadn’t had the opportunity to see many films. I could appreciate the irony of the situation, though. Here we were, two non-white girls dating two white guys discussing the finer points of racial stereotypes.

The pizza was outstanding and the conversation stimulating. I almost hated to see the dinner end. While I was curious about the movie, just sitting around having a good time talking to friends sounded like even more fun. And the best thing about it was that I was having a good time without alcohol. The pitchers of beer being carried to tables inhabited by college-age couples didn’t have any appeal to me after my taste of liquor in this new body.

We walked together to the movies. The theater was up on Main Street. The Olympian was one of the old style theaters that used to populate nearly every small town in America. The lighted marquee

listed the names of the actors and the title of the film. Under that were the words 'Bond is Back!' and a listing of show times. The whole building was a throwback to my youth. In spite of my recent circumstances, I was aware that most movie houses like the Olympian had been shut down in favor of large, multi-screen complexes.

We chose our seats and the guys even got some popcorn. How they could eat that after the pizza we had was beyond me. Trish was a little put off by it as well. "If we ate like those guys do," she told me while the guys were at the concession stand, "we'd have asses too wide for these seats."

I hadn't thought of it that way, but I suppose she was right. Not that it mattered. I don't even think I could have eaten popcorn on top of pizza when I was in college. But of course I was male then and would have probably finished off more pizza than the slice and a half I had eaten that evening. Oh, it was a fantastic pizza, but a girl has to watch her figure. Besides, that was more than enough to fill me up.

The movie was actually pretty good. I hadn't seen a Bond film in years, so this Brosnan guy they had playing him was a surprise. But the real surprise was the romantic interest. I had no idea who Halle Berry was, so imagine my shock when a very attractive black girl walks confidently out of the water in an outfit just like the one Ursula Andress wore in *Dr. No*.

I quickly forgot about James Bond and started avidly following every move Jinx—Berry's character—made. I watched the way she moved, listened to the way she talked, and wondered how my hair would look if I cut it short like hers. Without realizing it, I was bonding to the character, seeing myself in her role. And when the romantic scenes began, I found my new body becoming aroused at the thought of someone like Bond touching me.

I glanced over toward Trish who was sitting next to me, wondering if she was feeling the same things. She was snuggled up against Luke, her head resting on his shoulder. It was then that I realized I was sitting closer to Pete than I had meant to. His arm wasn't around me, but it was resting on the back of my seat, touching my long hair. I

would have said something, but for the moment, I enjoyed having his arm so close to me. I even wondered what it would be like to nestle up against him like Trish was doing with Luke...

When the film was over and we were filing out, Luke said, "There! See, a black woman was one of the good guys."

"Yeah," Trish snorted. "And all the bad guys were Orientals."

Pete and I just chuckled as we followed them out of the theater. We didn't even seem to be aware that at the moment, we were holding hands just like Luke and Trish.

After we broke away from Luke and Trish, Pete took me home, good to his word that we were just going out as friends. There were no groping hands in the car, no suggestions that we find some dark country road and snuggle, and no suggestive come-ons for me to worry about. I felt I had made a good decision going out with Pete. It confirmed that we were just friends, just as I had told mom.

But a little tiny part of me was just a little disappointed that Pete didn't try something. Other than holding hands when the movie ended and a few casual brushes against each other during the movie, we had respected each other's personal space. But watching Halle Berry up on the screen in the arms of Pierce Brosnan had made me at least a little bit curious. It didn't take much to project myself into Halle and Pete into Pierce. I couldn't help but be a little curious.

"I had fun tonight," Pete said as he walked me to the door.

"So did I," I replied, realizing not for the first time that it was true.

He took my hand after I unlocked the door. "Well, goodnight, Marsha."

I squeezed his hand. "Goodnight."

And that was it. Or it would have been if I hadn't given in to a sudden impulse and kissed him gently on the cheek. He blushed. I probably did, too, but with my skin color, I doubt if he noticed. I just smiled and shut the door.

What was I thinking? I asked myself. Pete is just a friend.

The house was quiet when I entered. My new parents had left a small light on in the living room. I left it on when I went upstairs since Jason had announced he wouldn't be home until midnight. I heard whispering behind the closed door of the master bedroom, followed by a feminine giggle. Apparently, my parents were still sexually active. I felt something akin to jealousy with that realization. The woman who was enjoying sex behind that door had once been my wife in another time and another place. Now I had lost her to a man who, strictly speaking, wasn't even really her husband since both had been transformed into the relationship...

That started me thinking again. Ovid did more than just change us—it defined us as well. It had taken a woman who had once been my wife and changed her into another woman—a black woman—who made love with a man who had been defined as her husband. And she was obviously enjoying it.

Would I be like that? Would I find I really thought of myself as a black teenage girl who liked boys—maybe even a white boy?

A combination of experiences was causing me to become noticeably aroused. Watching Trish and Luke cuddle, the love scenes between Jinx and James Bond, the sound of my new parents making love, and even the gentle sisterly kiss I had given Pete were culminating in a feeling I had never felt before.

I stripped out of my clothes under the bright light of a full winter moon. Had I been a girl longer, I would have probably been more modest and closed the drapes, but I liked the effect the moonlight had on my dark body. I looked at myself in the mirror when all my clothing had been removed. I was attractive; there was no doubt about that. My dark skin and long dark hair were exotic in the moonlight, and I realized perhaps for the first time how desirable my body must be.

I wondered if other men whose sex was changed were aware of all of this sooner than I was. For me, with my sexuality drowned in alcohol, thinking of myself as a girl was second to thinking of myself as a rational, sober person. My mental house more in order, I was suddenly aware of the sex I had become—and what that might mean.

I placed my hand between my legs, feeling as if for the first time the softly curled hair about my sex. I probed cautiously with a slim finger, careful only to brush against my clitoris. I let out a small gasp. I tried to think of myself as Jinx being touched there by James Bond. I sensed a growing warmth between my legs as I urged the fantasy on. It didn't take me long to get myself off, but when I came, I realized I was no longer thinking of James Bond.

I was thinking of Pete.

"Now be careful," Jennifer whispered to me. Trish and Tanya were just out of earshot, so Jennifer could speak freely. "March's is a little strange. Vera March and her husband are... associates of The Judge."

In other words, they were gods, I thought. It wasn't hard to figure out which ones, either. I noticed the gods chose names for themselves that were close to their Roman names. Mars and March sounded almost alike, and Vera and Venus at least began with the same letters. "What can happen to me that hasn't already happened?" I whispered back as I struggled to keep an unfamiliar purse on my shoulder.

Jennifer chuckled, her breath producing puffs of white as we walked along the sidewalks of Main Street on a chilly but sunny morning. "You'd be surprised. If Vera March gets hold of you, you could find yourself having a particular affinity for short skirts and three-inch heels."

"I'll try to remember that," I said. In my limited experience, it seemed as if the gods were willing to transform us and then leave us alone. But from what Jennifer said, it sounded as if they weren't above occasional tweaking. From what I had gleaned from Pete, Jennifer, and Trish, the gods ran just about everything of importance in the town, from the largest industry to the courts to the schools. I suppose it made sense that they would control some of the major retail businesses as well. It seemed a little odd that Mars would have

chosen to run a business, but I supposed business and war did have certain similarities. Besides, not too many small towns had their own armies.

March's Department Store wasn't particularly large as department stores go. Still, it seemed surprisingly well-stocked although given my previous circumstances, I hadn't been in many department stores in recent years. We made a beeline for the women's department. I just tried to keep up with the other three girls since I had no idea of how to act, but they hurried to their goal like thirsty horses smelling water. I hoped none of them noticed that I wasn't nearly as enthusiastic.

Tanya Davis was a shade, so whenever she would pick up an item and hold it up to herself, it would take on the same ethereal character associated with shades. "Do you think this goes with my eyes and hair?" she asked me, holding up a salmon pink sweater. She was a blue-eyed blonde so it did look good on her. I told her so.

I watched in growing alarm as the three girls held various items of clothing up to each other, commenting and giggling as they did. Then came round two, as they each selected several items and headed for the dressing rooms, leaving me alone in stunned silence. I wondered if Jennifer and Trish had been girls before Ovid. Certainly, no former man could ever take such delight from selecting clothing.

"Can't find anything you like?" the most beautiful voice I had ever heard in my life asked from behind me. I turned to find the woman who had spoken had an appearance to match her voice. Her hair was the most beautiful shade of blonde I had ever seen, and not a strand was out of place. She wore a stylish suit of what I would someday learn was called winter white. Her poise, her figure, and her smile were beyond perfect. I didn't even have to look at her nametag but I did. It only confirmed that this woman was a true goddess—Vera March.

"I..." I started to say but realized I hadn't even looked at anything yet.

"Let me help you," she offered. "It can be hard at first. Jennifer and Trish would tell you that if you asked."

"Hard for them?" I asked. "They were men?"

“Most women in Ovid were at one time,” she replied. I suppose she hadn’t really told me they had been men, but the implication was clear.

“Here!” she said brightly, pulling a tan dress from a rack. I would swear the dress hadn’t been there a moment before. “This would look nice on you.”

“It looks a little... lightweight,” I told her. It was just something that came to mind. I didn’t want to be trying on dresses.

“It’s for spring.”

“But... it’s winter now,” I pointed out.

Vera March gave me an indulgent smile. “The dressing room on the right is available.”

With an exaggerated sigh, I plucked the dress from her hands. I had certainly been warned about Vera March and had no intention of ending up in short skirts and three-inch heels, but I knew better than to argue with a goddess.

I had to admit, once I had struggled to get into the dress, that it did look pretty good on me. It was sleeveless and the skirt was short, so a fair amount of skin was exposed. The color of the dress complimented my skin tone very well.

“Let’s see what you found,” Trish called out from outside the dressing room. I heard giggles after that—probably from all three of the girls. Well, why not? I had watched them model clothing in front of the mirror for what seemed like hours. I supposed it wouldn’t hurt to do so myself.

My resolve collapsed as I stepped out of the dressing room. My three new friends were waiting expectantly for me, and Vera March stood behind them with an encouraging smile.

“Cool!” Jennifer pronounced.

“Yeah!” Tanya seconded while Trish just grinned.

I must have blushed as my exposed skin felt strangely warm. “I don’t

know..."

"Oh come on!" Jennifer laughed. "That will look so cool this spring."

"But it's winter," I reminded her.

Jennifer gave me an indulgent smile just like the one Vera March had given me.

"You really need some shoes to go with that," Vera March commented, making me aware that I was standing there with nothing but sweat socks on my feet. And so began my initiation to shopping.

How long had it been since I had been able to go into a store with the intention of buying something that didn't have alcohol in it? It seemed like forever. Now there I was, standing in the middle of the women's department trying on different outfits and being as silly as any teenage girl might be. I even bought some things since mom had allowed me to use her charge account.

Of course, Tanya had no idea who I had been, so she didn't notice when Trish or Jennifer would guide me along as we shopped. To my relief, Vera March seemed willing to let them take a hand in my initiation and had backed away to take care of other customers. I didn't think she had used any mystical influence over me since I felt no sudden urge to dress in satins and frills. I had bought a knit top and a pair of cool jeans and no three-inch heels. Well, I did buy the tan dress but it did look good on me...

So I ended up having a much better time than I had expected. I wasn't ready to block out every free moment for shopping excursions, but I could see myself doing it again sometime—especially if it meant spending more time with my new friends.

The only bad experience of the day came when we stopped for lunch. We ended up eating at a place called *The Greenhouse*. It was fairly upscale for a small town. I found out later that its proximity to the city offices and courts meant that it did a booming business during the week, depending more on shoppers on Saturday.

By the time we were seated, I was talking and giggling as if I had been

a girl all my life. Then after ordering, we went in pairs to the restroom. Tanya slipped in ahead of me, while I had to dodge someone mopping the floors. As I did, time slowed down just like it had in the hallway at the high school.

"I promised you we'd speak again."

Pro was leaning on a mop, smiling. I looked back into the dining room and saw that all motion had nearly ceased.

"Apparently you have many jobs," I said wryly.

"All of which allow me to work unnoticed," he agreed. "Now, you had more questions before you would agree to help me."

"I seem to remember asking you what made you think I wanted to be a man again."

He raised a single eyebrow. "Don't you?"

I tried to show an impassive expression. The real answer to that question was: I wasn't sure. It had been so long since I had been a virile male with a clear mind and in control of my own life that I had almost forgotten what it was like. Liquor will do that to a man. My last few years had been an impotent fog, alone, shuffling from town to town in a futile attempt to stay alive long enough to take my next drink.

Now, all that was changed. I was alert—probably as alert as I had ever been in my life. My ability to reason was restored. I had a family now, including a person who had cared for me in another existence. I was intelligent, popular, and healthy.

But I was a girl.

Was the trade-off worthwhile? I wasn't really sure. After all, the gods had robbed me of a decent life when they took my wife from me. With her help, I had apparently been sober and successful in a life I would never be allowed to remember. So wasn't I entitled to have some measure of that life returned to me—including my proper sex?

No, I realized, I wasn't. It seemed that without her at my side, I was doomed to a besotted life. If she had just simply died, leaving me

alone in my original life, I might well have turned back to the bottle for solace. It was my nature, it seemed.

“Don’t you?” Pro repeated, obviously hopeful that I would say yes.

“My life here isn’t so bad,” I finally replied.

“You say that now,” he cautioned, “but you don’t know what’s in store for you.”

Now that worried me. “And you do?”

He shrugged. “Only in a general sense. I see... problems for you. Your new race, your unfamiliarity with your new sex, the rather unusual relationship with your mother—all of these things could lead to disaster. I can save you from them.”

“In return for what?”

He smiled faintly. He thought he had made his point, and perhaps he had. I’ll admit I was concerned. Prometheus was known to have the gift of prophecy. He had chosen me with care—and perhaps with foreknowledge. “Next Wednesday is Engineering Day at your school. Several of you who have evidenced abilities in math and science have been invited to Vulman Industries to spend the day.”

That was news to me. I didn’t know what Engineering Day was and I didn’t really care. Of course, I had had a lot on my mind lately, and next Wednesday seemed far away. “So?”

“My associates and I believe that there are things going on at Vulman that are part of my cousin’s plan. We need to know what they are.”

“And you expect me to waltz into a high security area and retrieve your information,” I surmised. “Just because I’m a girl and black doesn’t make me Jinx.”

“Who?”

“It’s not important,” I said. “Look, my new mother works out there, sure. But I don’t think I’m going to be allowed to wander around on my own looking for Jup... Jup... your cousin’s secrets.”

He smiled. "Haven't you learned anything from watching me? You'll be given my gift—you'll be able to move about freely going wherever you need to go for long enough to bring us the information. No Vulman employee will even notice you should they happen to see you."

"I'll think about it," I told him. In truth, I had no intention of doing what he asked. While I might contemplate being a man again, I had a lot to lose. I had only his word that I was heading for a fall if I didn't go along with him.

To my surprise, he nodded. "That will do for now."

Before I could respond, I felt time speed up again, leaving me standing somewhat flustered at the restroom door. It opened suddenly. "Well, are you coming in or aren't you?" Tanya asked. Realizing only moments had passed I slipped into the restroom.

"So what did you find?" mom asked with amusement as I walked in the house. I'm sure she heard me coming, with all of the giggles and girlish yells coming from Jennifer's car as she dropped me off.

"Oh, a couple of things," I replied laconically as I dropped the sacks in the living room and sat down next to her.

She grinned. "You really got into this girl stuff pretty fast, didn't you?"

"Well, I'm not exactly built for football anymore," I said sarcastically, "so shopping appears to be the sport of choice for girls around here."

"You've got that right," she laughed. "Show me what you got."

"I don't have to model it, do I?" I asked suspiciously, remembering how my older sister would come home from shopping and insist everyone see her modelling her new clothes.

"Only if you want to."

I didn't want to, so I just showed her the outfits I had purchased and was strangely pleased when all of them met with her approval—especially the dress Vera March had picked out for me.

When I was finished, she said conspiratorially, "Look Marsha, your father and brother will be home soon, so we have a few minutes alone

if there's anything you need to ask me."

I would have liked to have asked her about our previous lives together, but I knew that would be a big mistake. Instead, I asked her something much more innocuous. "Okay, can I go over to Jennifer's tonight? She invited me over to watch a movie with Tanya and Trish."

"No date with Pete tonight?" she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"Pete's just a friend," I reminded her. Besides, he hadn't called me.

She put a motherly hand on my knee, and once again I found it hard to imagine that this maternal woman could ever have been my wife.

"Sure, you can go. Just don't stay out too late. We have church in the morning."

Trish picked me up after dinner and we were off to Jennifer's house. I thought she might mention something about my transformation but instead she acted as if I had always been a girl. I supposed that was the best way. Immersion was probably the way to fit in, in Ovid. The more everyone treated me as if I had always been Marsha Henry, the quicker I would assimilate.

With that in mind, the four of us had what was probably a typical girl's night in. Jennifer's parents were out for the evening, so we had Jennifer's impressive home to ourselves. We loaded a sappy Meg Ryan chick flick in the DVD player. It was the first time I experienced a home theater so I was impressed. I didn't get much out of the movie, though. All the way through it, we ate vast quantities of popcorn and drank diet sodas until I had to pee every twenty minutes or so.

In the quieter moments, I managed to think back at where I had been the previous Saturday night. It had been cold in Kansas City—bitterly cold—and I had managed to get a few bucks unloading a truck for a furniture warehouse. I had settled back in a dingy little room I had rented for a single night with a bottle of no-name bourbon and a cheap take-out burger. There had been no TV so I had just lain there on my musty bed watching the cars go by on the street below as I ate the cold burger and washed it down with the booze.

I shuddered at the thought of how miserable my life had been. Now I was warm, well-fed, had lots of friends and my mind was clear of alcohol, and all I had needed to give up to achieve all of this was my sex. Big deal. Pro was barking up the wrong tree if he thought he could sweeten the deal for me. Being a girl wasn't all that bad. I could probably get used to it. After all, what could possibly be wrong with my new life?

Of course, I was to learn soon that it was a question I should have paid more attention to.

My reverie was broken when the doorbell rang. Jennifer bounced off the couch to answer it, and soon I heard her giggling and the sound of deeper voices. Moments later, Luke, Barry, Dan (who I knew was Tanya's boyfriend), and Pete walked into the room. Barry already had an arm around Jennifer.

"Hey!" Trish called out. "We're watching chick flicks in here. No guys allowed."

Obviously, no one paid attention. Dan Garibaldi slid down on the couch next to Tanya, and the two shades kissed briefly. Jennifer and Barry filled in the rest of the couch. Trish, in spite of her teasing warning, had already scooted over in her overstuffed chair to give Luke room to join her.

It was then that I noticed Pete was still standing, but he was looking at me hopefully. Well, what else could I do? I was sitting in the same type of chair as Trish, and all the other seats in the room had been taken. I scooted over, too, and a very relieved Pete sat next to me.

He put his arm around me. What else could he do sitting so close to me? It was okay. After all, Pete was a friend. But it felt so strange to be in such close contact with him. In my old life, I couldn't remember the last time I had held a girl the way Pete was holding me. I only knew that in spite of the strangeness of Pete's larger, more angular body pressing against mine, the feeling was pleasant.

No. It was more than pleasant.

I began to feel something I had never felt before in my life. I felt as if I were melting. It was as if my body had heated up and began to flow against Pete's. I felt warm and... safe, I guess. Yes... safe.

My concentration returned to the movie where Tom Hanks had finally established his friendship with Meg Ryan, but she had no idea that he was the one she had fallen in love with through emails. How could she not realize that it was Tom Hanks who she was in love with I wondered? Could girls really be that dense? I snuggled up a little closer to Pete and thought about how lucky I was to have a friend like him.

We started another movie—a comedy this time with some girl named Sandra Bullock as an FBI agent working undercover at a beauty pageant. The guys seemed to like that film better, although I suspect it had something to do with the hot girls who paraded around in sexy outfits.

Beyond that, we mostly talked and ate popcorn and just enjoyed each other's company until it was time to go home.

"You going to church tomorrow?" Pete asked as we were all getting on our coats.

"Yeah. Mom said something about it."

"Cool! I'll see you there."

I had no idea we attended the same church, I realized as the guys left.

"Pete really likes you," Trish commented as she drove me home.

"Yeah, he's a good friend."

Trish just laughed. "I think you'll find he may become more than 'just a friend.' It happens with regularity around here."

"Yeah, I noticed you and Luke seem to be more than friends."

"I suppose we are," she admitted. "I think it's part of the transformation. Think about it. If The Judge just changed our bodies, some of us would still be lusting after girls when we became female. But that doesn't seem to happen."

“Not at all?”

“Well... who knows what everybody in Ovid does when they turn out the lights,” Trish laughed. “But I don’t remember seeing any Gay Lib demonstrations around here. Luke and I just sort of happened. That’s the way it could be for you and Pete, too.”

I was still mulling that over when I walked in the house. Was I really starting to think of Pete as more than just a friend? I didn’t think so. But it had been pleasant sitting there next to him while we watched the movie, and I did feel a little more comfortable when he was with me.

It had been some time since I had been in high school as a boy, and even there, drinking had been more important to me than girls. But I remembered some of my friends who had steady girls. Most of them seemed more possessive and more intimate relationships than the one Pete and I had developed. I thought... no, I was sure that Pete and I were just friends. I wasn’t ready to be his possession and I certainly wasn’t ready to be intimate with him.

In spite of my determination, I did have to admit I liked having him around. Besides, I suspected if he wasn’t hanging around with me, I’d be under a certain amount of pressure to renew whatever relationship the shade Marsha had enjoyed with Nate Daniels. Nate seemed like a nice enough guy from what little I knew of him, but he wasn’t... well, he wasn’t like Pete, I guess.

And, I told myself again as I climbed into bed, Pete was really just a friend.

As many times as I told myself that Pete was just a friend, I had it brought home to me the next morning that no one else believed that.

It all started before church. Pete caught my eye and we talked for a few minutes—just innocent stuff as he complemented me on my dress and told me what he and the guys had done after they left Jennifer’s house. It was hardly a conversation designed to raise eyebrows. But it was enough to start the ball rolling.

“Who was that boy you were talking with?” dad asked when we had settled into the pew.

“Just a friend from school,” I replied, a little uncomfortable with his challenging tone. “Pete Conway.”

“Vince Conway’s boy?”

“Yes.”

“You shouldn’t have anything to do with him,” dad said suddenly and decisively.

His tone shocked me. “Why is that?”

“His father is a racist; that’s why.”

“Stewart!” mom interjected. “You know that’s not true.”

“He wouldn’t hire Donna White—Eddie White’s girl.” I had heard dad mention Eddie White before. I knew he worked with dad at the college, and I knew that he was black like we were.

“Dad,” Jake broke in, “Donna White is a ditz. That’s probably why she didn’t get hired. It had nothing to do with her race.”

“That’s not what Eddie thinks,” dad insisted.

It was strange. Since I had been changed into a black girl, I had fully expected to be subjected to a certain amount of prejudice. I had even braced for it at first. I had just never expected it from the man who was now my father.

“Pete’s just a friend,” I told him pointedly, thinking to placate him. He was on the verge of making a scene in church. I was quietly hoping the service would begin quickly to calm him down.

“He...”

My hopes were answered as the organist began the introit. Dad settled down as we all rose, but I could tell from the look on his face that I hadn’t heard the last of it.

Although I hadn’t known the man who was now my father very long, I didn’t have to look past mom to see that he was seething. Maybe

Pete's father really was a racist, I thought to myself. Just because Pete wasn't didn't mean his father felt the same way. Why else would dad be so upset? But no, I realized. Pete told me his parents knew we were friends. If his dad was a racist, Pete would have said something about it by now.

What right did 'dad' have getting all pissed about my friendship with Pete? We were nothing more than friends. Even if we had been the same race, I would have felt no different about him. After all, I had been a girl for just a few days. I realized that I was starting to become mildly attracted to men, but I wasn't ready to be romantically interested in Pete or any other guy.

If I was upset about dad's attitude, Yolanda's attitude was even worse. She came up to me after church with two other black girls who I vaguely knew. "Hey, girl," she started, but there was a challenge in her voice.

"Hi, Yolanda," I managed, still upset at my father and not really expecting the attack which came next.

"So how come you're hanging out with the white girls now?" she demanded. There were frowns on all three girls' faces. "You go hanging around with them now. We aren't good enough for you now that you have a white boyfriend?"

"What?"

"You heard me, girl," she pressed, stepping closer toward me. "You didn't call all weekend, but you and that Jap girl double dated Friday night."

"It wasn't a double date," I protested. "We just ran into Luke and Trish at the restaurant. And what's with that 'Jap' stuff? How would you like it if she called you a nigger?"

Yolanda's eyes got wide but not as wide as the other two girls. "Did you hear that? She called me a nigger!"

"I did not!"

"Come on, Yolanda," one of the other girls huffed. "She don't want to

hang with the likes of us. We aren't good enough for her."

"Yeah," Yolanda sneered. "But don't you come crawling back to us when your white friends desert you." With that, she turned and stormed off, the other two girls in tow. I was too shocked to say anything to them, but maybe I should have pointed out that Trish wasn't white either.

"What was that all about?" Mom asked. She and dad had been chatting with friends not far away. Thank God it was she who noticed and not dad.

"I'll tell you later," I sniffed, realizing for the first time that I had begun to cry.

Dad drove and Jake rode shotgun on the way home. They had the good sense to be quiet while I whimpered softly in my new mother's arms in the backseat. I felt like such a wuss, sniffing and crying like that. I tried to tell myself that I should just shrug off Yolanda's behavior. As a man, I would never have broken down into tears over something like that. But there I was, either sobbing or getting ready to sob over nothing at all.

Nothing!

I hadn't asked Yolanda to be my friend. Our friendship had been part of the package when I became Marsha Henry. Could I help it if I felt a kinship to Trish and Jennifer that was stronger than the artificial friendship with Yolanda? It wasn't as if I was shutting Yolanda out; it was just that Yolanda thought of me as a typical Afro-American teenage girl with everything that such a life would entail. But that wasn't me. At least not yet it wasn't. Maybe it never would be.

Mom took me up to my room, sat down beside me on the bed with her arm around me and let me finish crying. It didn't take long, for I was just about all cried out.

"Feel better?" she asked at last.

"Uh-huh." Oddly enough, I did feel better. It was as if the act of crying had washed some of the hurt and confusion out of me. Maybe women

had something over men with their ability to cry over trivial things.

“You want to tell me about it?”

I did. Somehow, I managed to blurt out all the details on my friendship with Pete, Jennifer and Trish. Mom listened silently as I explained how each of my friends had helped me adapt to my new life. I prudently left out any references to Pro or the fact that I knew mom had been my wife in a previous, forgotten life. I almost broke down into tears a time or two, but I finally finished with, “What am I supposed to do?”

She hugged me tightly. “It’s hard; I know. It was hard for me when I came here. I missed my husband...” I hope she didn’t notice as I winced. “...and my friends. I was now married to a man—a black man, no less—who expected me to have sex with him. I had two children and no idea how to relate to them. I had never been black, never been a mother, and didn’t really know anyone.”

I hadn’t considered any of that before. I had secretly thought my former wife was lucky—she had always been a woman, after all. But what must it have been like for her to pretend to love a man she had never seen before? Had her black friends become angry with her for not really seeing herself as a black woman? “So how did you manage?” I asked in a small voice.

“Well, I didn’t strike up a relationship with a white boy for one thing.”

She was just teasing me, but I rose to the bait. “Pete and I don’t have a relationship! We’re just friends. Can’t anyone see that? Can’t you see that?”

“How do you think serious relationships begin?” she asked back.

I didn’t have an answer for her. We might have once been husband and wife, but I didn’t remember that. I didn’t remember any serious relationship with any girl in my life.

“I’ll tell you,” she said, answering her own question. “Most couples are friends before they’re anything else. You and Pete might just be friends now, but some people seem to be worried you might become more than friends. Now just so you know where I stand, I know you’re

just getting used to being a girl. Maybe when you're completely acclimated, you'll be more..."

"Normal?" I finished for her, tension in my voice. "You mean I'll listen to hip-hop and chum around with Yolanda and her friends, talking about how awful white folks are? Maybe I'll hop in bed with one of the big black guys on the basketball team and wonder what I ever saw in some white boy like Pete. Is that what you mean?"

"Of course not!"

"Just because you kept me sober when we were married..."

Oh shit. I had stepped in it now, I thought. The look on her face was so pained and shocked that I was afraid for a moment that she was having a heart attack.

"What did you say?"

I thought about lying. I thought about just running from the room. I thought about just finding a hole to crawl into and die. All of those things would have come naturally to me in my former life. But not in this one.

"I found out," I began slowly, "that you were my wife... before."

"You're Bob?"

I nodded.

"But how could you know we were...? I mean I didn't even know it until now. If you were Bob, you shouldn't even remember me. Who told you?"

I shook my head. "I can't tell you that."

She looked at me as if I had suddenly changed into something alien. With a sinking feeling, I realized at once that my careless mouth had instantly changed our relationship—perhaps forever. She had long ago accepted Marsha Henry as her daughter, and when I had taken the place of the shade who had been Marsha, nothing had really changed in her mind. But that was because she didn't know me—the old me that is. All that had changed with my emotional outburst. I wasn't her

daughter anymore; I was her former husband—a man who lacked the willpower to stay sober without her support.

“Can’t tell me or won’t?”

“Please, mom, don’t press,” I pleaded.

She stood up, and I felt an even wider gap come between us. “All right, I won’t. But please don’t call me ‘mom’ until you can tell me. If you can’t trust me with that...” Her voice trailed off and I could see tears glistening in her eye. Oh what had I done?

Before I could reconsider, she rushed from the room, closing the door behind her. I threw myself down on the bed, wanting this time to cry, but there were no tears left. I just groaned, feeling very sorry for myself. What had started out as a good day talking with Pete had turned into a disaster. How could it get any worse?

I found the answer to that not long after.

I was still lying on my bed when I heard a car pull up. There was a knock at the door and I heard a voice that sounded like Jennifer’s. That was confirmed a minute later when Jennifer called out from the other side of my door.

I fought back the urge to tell her to go away and got up and opened the door.

“Jeez,” she muttered. “You look like hell.”

In spite of myself I laughed nervously. “Oh, that really helps.”

“You’re still dressed for church.” Jennifer, on the other hand, was wearing jeans and a sweater. “Come on, let’s get you presentable.”

I was still too upset to ask why I needed to be presentable, so I didn’t argue as she picked an outfit for me similar to her own and repaired my damaged makeup. “I’m not very good at doing this on your skin color,” she admitted as she applied lipstick to my lips. Actually, she had managed to do pretty well. I found I had to go on automatic to do my makeup or I’d end up looking like something out of a horror movie.

“There!” she said at last. “Let’s go.”

“Go?” I asked. “Go where?”

She giggled, “Oh! I guess I forgot to tell you. I told your mom we had a study group at my house this afternoon.”

“But we don’t, do we?”

“No. Now just trust me.”

The Lincoln Navigator was missing from the garage, and I surmised Jennifer’s parents were out, so I was surprised when we entered the house and I heard a basketball game blaring from the family room. The TV clicked off suddenly and in a moment, Pete met us in the hall.

“Marsha!” he called happily, a grin on his face. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Okay? Why wouldn’t I be okay?” I asked as Jennifer made some lame excuse to go to her room leaving us alone.

“I heard about your confrontation with Yolanda and her friends,” Pete told me, escorting me into the family room where I sat next to him on the couch.

“It was nothing,” I lied. “Is that what you were worried about?”

Pete shook his head. “Not exactly. One of the girls with Yolanda—Belinda McAfee...”

I remembered the name and realized she had been the shorter of the two girls with Yolanda at church.

“...she’s Wilson Corey’s girlfriend. He’s on the basketball team.”

I was starting to see where this was going and shifted uncomfortably on the couch.

“So she apparently told Wilson you called Yolanda a nigger.”

“But I didn’t!” I practically screamed. “Has everyone gone crazy around here?”

“Anyhow,” Pete went on, “Wilson told Nate and challenged him to ‘get your girlfriend in line.’ Nate called me since he knew we were friends.”

I was too dumbstruck to respond.

“I tried to call you at home but your dad picked up the phone and wouldn’t let you talk to me.”

It just got worse and worse.

“Listen Marsha,” Pete explained. “I’m not going to say blacks don’t call each other by that name sometimes, but it’s all in the context. Carole Sue Wilcox stirred Yolanda and her friends up, starting the rumor that you thought you were better than the other Afro-Americans in school and that was why you were hanging around with the white kids.”

That explained a lot, I realized. Carole Sue knew better than to attack me herself. Instead, she took advantage of the hidden concerns many blacks obviously had and coaxed them to the surface causing the black community to attack me. She must have known she would have gotten nowhere taking her case to any of my new white friends. They remembered who they had been and had forged new lives from their transformations, but my black friends had no other memories. Girls like Trish and Jennifer were too strong to listen to Carole Sue’s nonsense, but Yolanda and her friends could be manipulated. Even my own father would have agreed with Carole Sue, and I had managed to alienate my only black supporter when I had withheld information from my mother.

In short, I was screwed.

“Look Pete,” I began slowly, “I don’t want to cause any trouble. We’re just friends but that seems to be too much for a lot of people. Maybe it would be better if we didn’t...” I almost said, “see each other,” but that sounded too much like a dating relationship. “...chum around together.”

To my surprise, Pete put his arm around me. “Look, Marsha, I told you when we first met that it wasn’t a good idea to tell people who you were before until you were sure it was a good idea.”

Yeah, I thought grimly. It’s a shame I didn’t remember that before I told ‘mom’ that I used to be her husband.

“I want to tell you who I was,” he continued.

“You don’t have to,” I protested, realizing now the pitfalls of such information.

“Yes I do,” he said softly. “Then you’ll understand. You see, I’ve always been male. At least I didn’t have to go through a sex change like so many do here in Ovid. But I wasn’t the middle class white boy you see now. I was black—blacker than you by far. I grew up in the projects back in Chicago, but I was big and smart and a damned good athlete. If things had worked out differently, I’d be aiming toward an NFL career by now.

“I got a football scholarship to the University of Oklahoma—playing linebacker. I was a senior, due to go high in the draft. I was just heading back up to Chicago for a few days to see my brother when I ended up in Ovid instead. It seems I was due to have a fatal car wreck later that day, so that made me fair game. The Judge only takes people who are about to die.”

I thought about escaping from that band of thugs in the Kansas City rail yard. If that ghostly train departing for Ovid hadn’t been just where it was, I would have been killed—just like several other derelicts had been. I shivered at the thought of such a lonely, senseless death.

“So the next thing I know, I’m a white boy,” he went on.

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” I told him, thinking of how much simpler my life would have been if The Judge had turned me into a guy like Pete.

He smiled, shaking his head. “No, for you it wouldn’t sound bad at all. But I was black and I was proud of being black. You think blacks want to be white? Bullshit! Most blacks are perfectly happy being black—and yes, I’ve figured out you weren’t black before. It’s not that hard to tell, you know. Blacks are just like everybody else. They have the same needs, the same aspirations, the same fears...”

“And the same prejudices,” I finished for him.

“Exactly. I can’t say I was ever too crazy about white folks. They seemed to look down on what they saw as a big dumb black jock. But

I had—and still have—an IQ of 140. The more they looked down on me, the more I felt they were the dumb ones.”

“Okay,” I said. “So yeah, I used to be white and you used to be black. What does that have to do with our problem?”

Pete shifted uncomfortably, pulling his arm away from me and turning to look me in the eye. “Marsha, when I first became Pete, I noticed Marsha—the shade Marsha—right away. I thought she—you—were the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. You see, my taste in girls hadn’t changed. In my mind, I was still that big black guy and Marsha Henry was my kind of girl. But she was like I had been when I was black. She didn’t want anything to do with the white kids. Oh, we’d talk and even walk home from school together a few times, but she always kept her distance. Then you became Marsha.”

Oh no, I thought, realizing for the first time where all of this was going.

“When you became Marsha, you were different. You were still beautiful, but you were more approachable...”

“Pete...”

“No, I’ve got to say it,” he insisted resolutely. “Marsha, I think I’m in love with you.”

Well, I wondered how the day could get any worse. Now I knew.

“I know you don’t love me,” he continued. “How could you? You just got here. For all I know, maybe you were a man. But even if you were a man before, this is who’ll you’ll be from now on, and maybe someday—somehow—you’ll start to feel the same way about me.”

Before I could say anything, he jumped to his feet. “There! That’s why I wanted to see you today. I wanted you to know that I cared for you, but I realize you’re not ready for anything like that. All I’m doing now is causing trouble for you. I’ll back away and let you adjust to your life without my interference. I’m sorry.”

Maybe I should have called out to him as he rushed out of the house, but I really didn’t know what to say. I considered Pete a friend—a very dear friend. But his admission that he was romantically interested in

me was shocking. Underneath it all, I realized he had paid me a very great compliment, but on the surface, it was as if I had been betrayed. There was nothing in my experience that would have prepared me for such a thing.

Jennifer stepped into the room as soon as Pete closed the door behind him. "You heard?" I asked.

"I didn't have to hear," she replied. "I knew why he wanted to see you."

"You knew he was... was..." I just couldn't say "in love with me." It was just too alien to roll off the tongue.

She sat next to me where Pete had been only moments before. "It wasn't my place to say anything, Marsha." When I said nothing, she continued, "Look, I know how complicated this can be. It took me a long, long time to get used to being a girl. Did I tell you that I was a man before? Well, I was—a college football player no less. I still know more moves than most of the guys on our high school football team, but now I have to cheer them on from the sidelines."

I didn't recall telling Jennifer I had been a man, but I guess it had been sort of obvious. "Yeah, but did anybody hit on you your first week?"

Jennifer laughed, thrusting out her chest and brushing back a lock of her blonde hair. "Are you kidding? Looking like this? Of course guys hit on me. Even now, every time they think Barry and I are going to split up, guys hit on me constantly." She grinned. "Of course when Barry and I do have a spat, we have a lot of fun making up."

It was nearly impossible for me to look at her and imagine that she had ever been a man—a jock, no less. "But didn't you feel..."

"Feel what?"

I might as well just say it, I thought. "Didn't you feel... well... gay, dating a boy and all?"

"Oh yeah," she giggled. "You see, Barry and I used to be friends—male friends. We played football together in college. When I first realized he liked me—as a girl, I mean—I just about flipped out. So you see, you've

got it easier than I did.”

“Assuming I decide I like guys,” I corrected her.

She shrugged. “Sorry, honey, but you won’t be able to avoid it. That’s part of the transformation. There’s no Gay Lib movement in Ovid. I think The Judge may have some sort of hang-up about that.

Relationships are strictly hetero, and that means you’re going to be attracted to guys. If it doesn’t happen now, in a couple of months when you start having periods, you...”

“Periods!”

“Well yes, sweetie. What did you think—that you were immune?”

It had just never crossed my mind, but Jennifer went on to explain how newly transformed women didn’t have to worry about that for a couple of months. It was apparently sort of a built-in protection to allow us to get used to our new bodies. By the time Jennifer dropped me off back at my house, I had come to realize that I was destined to become someone’s girlfriend eventually—if not Pete’s then some other guy’s.

I brooded about that and other things all evening. I couldn’t believe how my world had turned to shit so quickly. In one day, I had managed to be chastised by my classmates, alienate my mother, lose one of my best friends, and learn that I was going to have periods and be stuck with a boyfriend. Suddenly, Pro’s offer was looking better.

I began to wonder as I saw him standing there leaning on his broom Monday at school if he didn’t have something to do with my woes. His smile was simply too smug. Maybe he had been at church the day before, invisible even to me as he listened to Yolanda’s tirade.

“Want to discuss my offer?” he asked lightly.

Time had already slowed down around us once more. I was actually getting used to the strange effect. “What is it you want me to do?” I sighed in resignation.

I didn’t think his smile could get any wider, but it did. “Don’t act so

worried. It's not going to be that difficult. As I tried to tell you, some of your math class is going to be participating in Engineering Day this Wednesday."

I still hadn't looked that far ahead in my calendar. "What the hell is Engineering Day anyhow?"

"It's just an afternoon excursion to Vulman Industries," he explained. "You'll have lunch there and get a presentation on careers in engineering. Then you'll all be given a tour of the building—or at least the parts of the building you're allowed to see for security reasons."

"And why is it that I suspect what you want me to do isn't in one of those areas we'll be allowed to see?" I asked, my hands on my hips.

"Oh, you really are perceptive," he laughed. "But don't worry. You'll be fine." A set of plans appeared in his hands out of nowhere. He unfurled them and pointed to a location marked Lab 1-21B. "There's where I need you to go," he told me. "All you'll need to do is drop off the tour here at this women's restroom. Then, you'll get past the checkpoint and take a look in the lab."

"And just how do I get past the checkpoint?" I asked sarcastically. "And won't somebody see my James Bond spy camera?"

The sarcasm didn't faze Pro. "The checkpoint is a simple retinal and palm scan. Since your mother is cleared for the lab, I'll set you up with a little spell so that all you need to do is give her a hug that morning and you'll have her palm print and retinal pattern for the next twelve hours or so. As for the camera, don't worry; there aren't any in that area. And as I've assured you before, if anyone who works at Vulman sees you, they won't think anything is amiss. You're harmless—just like me. Just observe. I can take the images I need from your mind later."

"And what do I get out of all of this?" I pressed.

"I presume you want to be male again?"

I nodded, albeit a little slowly. Male—female—it didn't really matter as long as I got the hell out of Ovid.

"And white?"

“Sure, why not?”

“Then that will be your reward,” he said with a grin.

“Yeah,” I scoffed. “You’ll do that for me. But come to think of it, I was male and white before and I made a mess of it. So far, all you’ve promised me could be my old life back again. And to get that, I get to risk pissing off The Judge and maybe getting turned into a French poodle or something. Have I got that right?”

“Well,” he explained innocently, “I’ll admit that you haven’t had much success as a white male, but then again, you’ve sort of made a hash of your life as a black female, too. And in only four days, too! That must be some sort of a record.”

I saw I wasn’t the only one who could be sarcastic.

“Don’t worry, Marsha. We’ll give you a fresh start. You’ll be sober, healthy, and bright enough to make your way in the world—especially with the stake we give you to start out. As for annoying The Judge, I suppose that’s just the risk you’ll have to take to get things back to where you can handle them. Now, do we have a deal?”

There it was. I had an out. I could be white and male again, only this time, I’d have a fresh start. No more wearing skirts and cosmetics. No concern about having periods—or not having them and getting pregnant someday, no more jealous girls, no more prejudice, no more dealing with former spouses. In short, no more Ovid.

“All right,” I said softly.

Time resumed its natural flow, and I heard the whispered voice of Pro promising, “See you Wednesday.”

So I spent the next two days wondering if I’d made the right decision. When I had finally agreed to help Pro, I had been angry. I was angry at Yolanda and the other black girls for treating me as a pariah for daring to be friends with whites. I was angry at my father for his unreasonable prejudices. I was angry with mom for just being who she was. I was angry at Carole Sue and Nate—two people I barely knew—for fomenting trouble while their real agendas remained hidden. I knew

Carole Sue wanted Pete and I was pretty sure Nate was looking for an opening which would make me his girl again.

But most of all, I was angry at Pete. Oh, I know I shouldn't have been, but I felt as if he had misrepresented himself. He had wanted to be more than a friend from the start. What had he expected me to do? There I was, just changed into a girl. Was I supposed to fall madly in love with him or something?

The funny thing was that if he had taken more time, he might have achieved his goal. Like it or not, I was a girl and I had begun to think like a girl in my unguarded moments. Pete was a nice looking boy—maybe even handsome. He was personable, witty, respectful, and intelligent as well. So what if he was white? That wouldn't have mattered to me. After all, until recently, I had been white as well.

And to top it off, I was mad at the whole town as well. At first, I had seen Ovid as some sort of paradise—an ideal community where I could wash off the dust and pain of years on the road and settle down into a pleasant life. Yeah, it would have been the life of a black girl, but wasn't that one hell of a lot better than the life of a penniless sot who happened to be white and male?

The last day had taught me that there was a snake in my Eden after all. Ovid was a town with all the petty jealousies and prejudices as the world outside. A person could be disliked for his race, religion, sex, or any other pigheaded reason one could imagine. It seemed as if the transformees who remembered weren't so bad. Pete had actually been black once, and both Jennifer and Trish had been men. Trish had also had her race changed as well. They seemed more understanding, but most residents of Ovid were either shades or people who didn't remember any other life. They were just like small-minded people everywhere.

But once the anger began to ebb, I began to wonder if I hadn't been entirely too hasty. After all, what had I bargained for? If I succeeded, I was to be male once more—and white. But I hadn't done a very good job when I had enjoyed those two attributes before. What made me think I'd do any better with them returned to me?

Besides, being a girl hadn't been all that bad. I had made some good friends—like Jennifer and Trish. I had actually been avoiding them after I talked with Pro. I guess I figured in a short time, I would never see them again, so why bother? Then there was Pete. As much as I wanted to hate him, I couldn't. He was making good his promise to avoid me, and I found whenever I glanced at him in a class or in the hall that I really wanted to hear his voice and touch his hand again.

Even mom wasn't a worthy target of my anger. Dad had continued to stew over my 'relationship' with Pete, sure that I was about to run away and marry him or something. Mom—and Jake for that matter—tried to tell dad that it was now the twenty-first century and blacks and whites could be friends without fear of the KKK burning a cross in the front yard, but he would have none of it. I was amazed that a man as sweet as dad could be so sour when it came to the issue of race.

Did I say sweet?

Well, there it was again. Words like 'sweet' had crept into my mind. I was starting to notice clothing colors and how they fit together. My gestures, from the way I moved my hands or flipped my hair back to the way I crossed my legs or stood, were becoming obviously feminine. If I didn't shed them when I turned back into a man, everyone would think I was a gay interior decorator. And as disturbing as that thought was, I was already becoming comfortable with my new thoughts and moves. I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to give them up.

The other thought that began to run through my head was that I was running away again. I say 'again' because that is what I had come to realize drinking was all about. I had run from my problems by running straight into a bottle. As Marsha Henry, I no longer had the ability to lose myself in an ocean of alcohol, so I had found a new way to run away from my problems—I would become someone else.

So there was my dilemma. Part of me felt that the new life that had been forced upon me had already fallen apart. My best friend had run away, my new mother had lost faith in me, my father and black friends and probably my former boyfriend considered me unfit because I had non-black friends. Oh yes, and how could I forget? Carole Sue Wilcox

and most of her crowd hated my guts.

But another part of me actually enjoyed being Marsha Henry. I was smart, attractive, and sober with a potentially bright future ahead of me. So what if I had to be a black girl to have all that?

Maybe I could have the best of both worlds. Pro had promised me a fresh start as a man. If he was playing straight with me, maybe I could have a lot of those things I enjoyed as Marsha Henry but as a white male away from the problems of Ovid. It was a hope I clung to.

At least I had schoolwork to take my mind off my personal problems. As Marsha, I had a sharp mind. I guess I had really had a sharp mind as Bob Wallace once upon a time—until I had immersed it in alcohol that is. Facts and ideas long buried in my teenage male mind re-emerged unbidden, allowing me to maintain Marsha's reputation as a top-notch student. Math and the sciences were particularly easy for me, and I found I was pushing Marsha's already high grade point in those areas to even greater heights. I just hoped that whatever The Judge did to replace me when I was gone didn't cause those achievements to fall.

But by Tuesday evening, I was no longer able to hide my anxiety. Mom noticed during dinner when I was even quieter than usual. Since dad was still angry with me, suspecting there was more to my relationship with Pete than I had let on, and Jake barely spoke to me in front of dad, fearing dad might come down on him for supporting me, my only words at the table were monosyllabic answers to mom's prompting.

"What's wrong?" she asked me as I studied in my room for classes I would never attend again.

"Nothing," I lied.

She sat down on the bed where I had been half-heartedly studying. "Marsha, look, I'm sorry I got upset with you. It's just that you caught me by surprise. When I thought about it, I realized you didn't owe me an explanation. I suppose you really don't even remember being married to me, do you?"

“No.”

She put her hand on mine. “Marsha, I love you very much—and not because you used to be my husband. I love you for who you are and for who you’ve become. I know this is hard for you, but you’ll adjust. I think everyone does. And when you do, you’ll find out how wonderful it can be to be a beautiful and intelligent young lady.”

I looked away so she couldn’t see the tears forming in my eyes. Damn her! Why did she have to say all of that? Why couldn’t she let me hate her?

Before I knew it, I was in her arms, sobbing softly.

“It will be all right,” she said, stroking my long hair. “You’ll see.”

But I wouldn’t see, would I? I thought later as I lay alone in the darkness on what was to be my last night as Marsha Henry.

I awoke Wednesday morning and started to get ready for school as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Mom came in as I was getting up and gave me a hug. I think I had actually convinced myself that nothing really would be out of the ordinary—that Pro was nothing more than a bad dream. But while I was in the shower, I had reason to believe that I was just deluding myself. I felt a tingle on my fingertips and palms and an itching sensation in my eyes.

‘You now have fingerprints and retinal patterns which will get you into the lab this afternoon,’ a voice whispered in my mind so softly it could have almost been one of my own thoughts.

“But what...” I began.

‘You don’t need to speak out loud,’ the voice told me. ‘Just think back to me.’

‘But what am I supposed to do once I’m in the lab?’ I asked silently.

‘Just observe. I will see whatever you see. Now here’s the exact location of the lab...’

It was almost as if a bright light had been turned on inside my head. Images flashed behind my eyes until I knew exactly where I needed to go. I think I could have found the lab in the dark.

‘Good luck!’

The sensation that someone else was inside my mind evaporated, and I realized suddenly that I had never asked Pro what I needed to do to be changed back into a man. Maybe it would just happen at the completion of my mission. I hoped not, though. I wanted to be able to savor my last moments as Marsha.

Classes that morning seemed interminably long. Thankfully, I had no tests or quizzes and the teachers never bothered to call on me. If they had called on me, I would have probably had no idea what they had asked me since my mind was completely on the mission now facing me. I nearly passed out in relief when just before lunch hour the PA system summoned all of us scheduled for the Vulman tour to report to the bus.

Since I hadn’t been involved with the initial decision to go on the field trip to Vulman Industries, I hadn’t realized that the tour was made up of prospective math and science majors. When I was originally in high school, membership in the Math Club or the Science Club was a passport to permanent nerd-dom. No so in Ovid, it appeared. A number of popular students piled on the bus, including Pete. I hung back, allowing him to board well before me. I just hoped I wouldn’t be asked to sit with him on the bus.

No, that wasn’t really right. In fact, I would have loved to sit with him on the bus. I would have loved to have someone to talk with since my self-imposed isolation from my classmates was starting to wear on me. Well it wouldn’t make any difference in a few hours, I told myself. I’d be a man again by then.

Why was it that thought didn’t bring me more comfort?

When I got on the bus, I looked around for a place to sit. I spotted Pete and my heart sank at once. Carole Sue was sitting next to him. That bitch! What was she doing on the bus? She couldn’t add two and

two and get the same answer twice in a row. As for science, Carole Sue impressed me as the sort of girl whose only interest in chemistry would be whether or not her makeup had something in it which might make her face break out.

Yes, I know it was catty of me and a stereotypically female thought, but there it was and I couldn't take it back. In fact, Carole Sue was a good student—not as good as I was, but good.

I slipped silently into an empty seat near the front of the bus, several rows from Pete and Carole Sue and right behind Mr. Potter, the faculty advisor for the Math Club. I tried my best to ignore Carole Sue's smug look. She knew I was pissed, though. Just a few more hours, I reminded myself, and none of this would matter.

Vulman Industries had a fairly impressive headquarters. The office building was two stories high, trimmed in light-colored brick and attractive landscaping. Behind the office building, I could see what I understood to be the manufacturing plant where parts for new Fords were stamped out. To the east, connected by a new corridor, was the area I would have to enter—the labs. The information Pro had provided for me was pretty complete, and I knew that I'd need to make my way to the secret lab at the start of the tour not long after we left the briefing room.

An attractive young woman in a smart blue business suit met us in the lobby and introduced herself as Holly Cache. She was dark, although not Afro-American. Rather, I suspected she was American Indian.

"We'll swing by the cafeteria where a sack lunch has been prepared for you," she told us. "Then we'll go to the briefing room for lunch and a talk from our president, Eric Vulman. We'll start the tour about 1400."

She giggled when she saw the confusion on a number of faces. "Sorry, that's two o'clock."

Holly Cache was real, and her use of a twenty-four hour clock made me wonder if she had once been military. Of course even if she had been military, it was possible she had always been female, but I

wondered if the beautiful young Indian girl had once been a man like me.

The briefing room actually looked suspiciously like a classroom with white boards and the front and an AV stand near the back. But unlike our classrooms, long curved tables covered stair-step tiers and the chairs accompanying them were padded in a soft blue fabric and turned like executive office chairs.

It was actually going to be easy to split away from the group, I told myself as I munched on a rather tasty sandwich. No one had bothered to sit next to me. Jennifer wasn't on the tour or she might have sat with me. Trish was there, but Luke was occupying her when I entered the room and I didn't want to sit next to them and disturb them. With Trish and Luke only having eyes for each other and the rest of the group avoiding me as if I had the plague, I'd be able to break away unnoticed.

I didn't have much time to think about that, though, because Holly came back into the room followed by a man of fifty or so. I knew from Pro's information that Eric Vulman was the god Vulcan, but after seeing other gods who all appeared to be in both perfect health and perfect shape, the president of Vulman Industries was something of a surprise. Beefy and somewhat good-looking in a rugged, blue-collar sort of way, Eric Vulman looked as if he would be more at home on a construction project than in a board room. Also, he walked with a slight but noticeable limp.

Once Holly had introduced him, he gave us all a fatherly smile. "It's a pleasure to have some of Ovid's brightest students here today," he began in a casual, unrehearsed manner. "Hopefully, you'll like what you see today and it will encourage you to follow careers in science and engineering..."

He went on to explain the history of Vulman Industries—which I suspected was bogus—and then went on to describe the products Vulman Industries provided to the world. I noted that he spent a great deal of time talking about more mundane products, such as parts for cars and trucks, and very little time discussing military products.

Maybe Pro was right after all. Maybe there was more to Vulman Industries than most people suspected. Well, I'd soon find out.

He was actually an interesting speaker, keeping the students interested and even asking some of them questions, calling them by name. I suppose that it shouldn't have been a surprise then when he called on me but it was.

"Ms. Henry!"

"Huh?"

There were giggles from around the room.

"Have you ever considered a career in engineering?" The look on Eric Vulman's face told me that he knew more than he was saying. I supposed all of the gods talked amongst themselves, and he probably knew who I was and that I had actually been an engineer in a life I could not recollect.

"Maybe," I allowed carefully. I didn't know what powers the god had. The Judge, I suspected, could read my thoughts right down to their very core. As for gods like Eric Vulman, I wasn't so sure. I didn't want him to probe me and find out that by nightfall, I probably wouldn't even be Marsha Henry.

"I hear you have excellent math skills," he told me. "I would encourage you to pursue a career in engineering to make maximum use of those skills."

"Th... thank you," I managed as he moved on to question another student.

Maybe I could be an engineer, I thought to myself. Once I had been changed back into a man, I could go back to school and make something of myself.

Or could I?

After all, who would I be? Pro had only promised to return me to being a white male with a 'stake' as he put it. Would the stake be enough to send me back to school? Would I have the credentials I needed to

even get into college? As Marsha Henry, I suspected my parents would be more than happy to send me to college. Plus I would be younger than I was sure to be as a man. I'd have my whole life ahead of me, even if it was as a black woman. Was I trading a comfortable future for a lot of unknowns?

I had agreed to help Pro in a fit of pique. I had felt friendless, unsupported, and unloved. Well, I mean unloved by my mother—not Pete. After all, Pete and I were just friends. And I missed my friend very, very much.

But the time for misgivings had passed. Holly Cache had asked us all to follow her for the tour. My moment had come, and I had not found any solid reason for not doing what Pro had asked of me.

I hung back from the group as we passed the restrooms. It was almost too easy, I thought, as I ducked into the women's restroom and listened at the door until the class had turned a corner out of sight. I hurried to the door of the lab I was supposed to check out, but I tried not to look as if I was hurrying. I probably did a bad job of that but I saw no one in the halls.

Pro had told me his intelligence indicated that there were no surveillance cameras along my path, but I found myself looking up for them nonetheless. To my relief, he was right. After what seemed to be hours but were in reality only a few seconds, I reached the lab.

I had indulged in a silly fantasy that there might be a glass window in the lab, allowing me to observe without actually going in. No such luck, I'm afraid. But Pro had assured me that I would now be able to make the security system believe I had the proper retinal pattern and palm print to allow me to enter.

I left the door slightly ajar so I could make a quick getaway if I needed to. If the lab was occupied, I might have been able to get away before anyone noticed me. To my relief, I was alone in the lab. The only noises in the room were the sounds of my breathing and a gentle hum coming from a test stand.

As I looked at the test stand, I felt as if I should have one of those little

spy cameras and be clicking away at the mysterious if a little mundane item it supported. I recognized it as some sort of motor, humming almost silently to itself, its smooth silver skin bathed in the sunlight falling from the large skylights above. Although my memories of being an engineer were long gone, something in me recognized it as being some type of solar generator, converting sunlight to power. But the speed of the rotor inside the silver casing seemed to be much too fast for any known solar generator, as if the device was drawing power from another source as well.

Curious, I looked more closely at the rotor. It was attached to a shaft which ran through a round hole that penetrated the block, as I had come to think of the silver device as a streamlined engine block. The odd thing was that as I looked at the shaft, I could see that it wasn't physically attached to the engine. It seemed to hover precisely in the center of the hole, virtually frictionless.

I had become so enthralled with the engine, wondering how I could have ever thought it mundane, when the door flew open. My heart was in my throat. I had been discovered! If whoever just opened the door reported me to The Judge, today might be my first day as a sewer rat. I turned in terror of who I might discover...

"Pete!"

I was instantly both angry at him for startling me and relieved that it wasn't anyone else.

"Marsha, you have to get out of here!" he snapped.

"What...?"

"Listen, Carole Sue saw you hanging back and followed you. She just told Mr. Potter and that Holly person that you were up to something."

"Shit!" Nobody was supposed to notice me... Shit again! Pro must have been too specific in his spell. He had promised me no one working at Vulman would think what I was doing was unusual. But Carole Sue didn't work at Vulman. Besides, with her inherent dislike for me, I'm not even sure one of Pro's spells would have been enough

to deter her.

Pete took my hand. "Come on; let's get out of here."

"Too late," I said resignedly as the sounds of agitated voices could be heard just beyond the lab, getting closer. I had been caught.

Before I could think of anything, Pete tugged me close to him and planted his lips on mine while placing his free hand under my sweater. I tried to gasp and break away, but he held me too tight, the hand which had been holding mine now crushing me against him, smashing my breasts.

"Mr. Conway!" I heard Mr. Potter screech in his reedy voice. "Ms. Henry! Just what do the two of you think you're doing?"

Pete broke away from me as if he had been hit with a cattle prod. He jumped in front of me as if to shield me from harm. "Oh! Mr. Potter! We... uh... the door was open, and we... uh..."

"I can see what you were doing," Mr. Potter interrupted. "There's a time and a place for such activities, and this is not among them. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Conway?"

"Oh yes sir, Mr. Potter," Pete replied. I was glad he was shielding me. His performance was so convincing he deserved an Oscar for it. He had completely bamboozled Mr. Potter into believing he and I had just slipped away to make out. Other than spying, it was the only logical explanation for us being there.

While Mr. Potter huffed, I could see that Holly was not quite as convinced. "Mr. Vulman will have to be informed," she explained, paging him on her cell phone as she shooed us out of the lab. She was obviously concerned about what we had seen in there. At least Mr. Potter hadn't seen anything. He was too busy being scandalized that two of the school's best math students had been making out on a field trip. I didn't know until then that it was possible for a shade to flush.

Mr. Potter and Holly ushered us into a part of the building we hadn't seen before. It contained well-appointed offices and was obviously

Vulman's version of Executive Row. We were motioned into the largest office of them all. "Here they are, Mr. Vulman," Holly said once we were standing before the man I was certain was the blacksmith of the gods.

"Thank you, Holly," he replied pleasantly. He looked over at Mr. Potter once the door was closed. "Sleep," he said.

I heard a plop behind me and looked around to see that Mr. Potter had fallen like a limp dishrag into one of the comfortable leather chairs along the wall.

"Now we can speak candidly," Eric Vulman explained to us, motioning for us to be seated across from his desk as Holly joined him at his side.

"The two of you just caused quite a fuss," he commented calmly.

"We're sorry," Pete said, speaking for both of us. "It's just that the door was already open and..."

"Open, you say?" The expression on his face was one of skepticism.

"Yes, sir," Pete continued more innocently than I could have managed.

"And you see, Marsha and I have been sort of... stifled lately. Some of the other kids..."

"...don't like interracial relationships?" he finished for us.

"Well..." Pete drawled.

The god nodded. "Yes, I know. When we formed the shades, we erred in giving them completely human personalities. That means they can be prejudiced just like anyone else. It's the same with the transformed ones who don't recall their previous lives. The rest of you come to understand that such differences as race or sex are not so important."

He noticed the shocked expression on our faces and chuckled, "Oh yes, I am a god—the god Vulcan—but I suspect you already knew that. Ovid's a small town and there aren't that many secrets. But there are secrets, my young friends—very important secrets."

He was no longer chuckling. A serious expression covered his face

and Holly's as well.

"Do you have any idea what was in that lab?" he asked.

Pete I found out later was about to say he saw nothing. I suppose he would have been telling the truth since he never took his eyes off me. It was a question I thought I should answer instead. "It's some kind of motor," I admitted.

The god nodded. "Yes, go on. Do you know what type of motor it is?"

"I don't know much about cars," I told him.

"Oh come now," he scoffed. "You were, I happened to know, once a man. Men and boys alike are enamored with cars."

"Yes, that's true," I agreed. "But it's been a long time since I've driven a car—even longer since I owned one. I haven't kept on modern developments."

"You knew enough to think it was a car engine."

"Is it?" I asked innocently.

"What it is doesn't concern you," he grumbled, sinking back into his chair. Pete and I had sense enough to realize he was about to decide if we were lying or not. Actually we weren't. Pete, as I have already said, wasn't really paying attention to the engine, and although I had been sent to discover it, I really had no idea what made it so special, but I could speculate—not that I was about to in front of a powerful god.

I only hoped Vulcan couldn't read minds. In case he could, I tried to think of anything except the real reason I had been in the lab. I tried to think as if Pete and I really had gone in there to make out. I tried to imagine what it would have been like to anticipate Pete's attention—to feel the thrill of kissing him and being held by him as his hand moved up under my sweater. To feel...

Why was I suddenly feeling so warm? Why did my nipples feel so sensitive and why was there a liquid sensation between my legs? I looked over at Pete and suddenly the sensations became even

stronger. I began to think of Pete in a way I never dreamed possible. I guess I began really to see him through the eyes of a young woman for the first time. I wouldn't go so far as to call it love, but it was definitely a form of attraction I had never felt before.

"Should I call The Judge's office?" Holly asked suddenly, breaking the silence.

I don't know if my efforts to avoid thinking about my mission succeeded or if Eric Vulman simply lacked the ability to read my thoughts. Whatever the reason, he tapped his fingers on the top of his polished walnut desk for a few more seconds and then replied, "No, Holly, I don't think there's any reason to involve my father in this. No harm was done this time. Put out a memo to all employees, though, to make certain doors to secured areas are firmly closed when they leave them."

"Yes, sir."

I found myself holding Pete's hand as we left the office. At first, we held hands just to make it look good as we left Mr. Vulman's office. But even after we were completely out of his sight, we continued to hold hands. I think we were both still so nervous that we would fall to the ground had we not felt the touch of the other's hand. I even found I wanted Pete to hold onto me. I leaned into him and he released my hand, putting his arm around me.

I had been a fool, I realized. I had risked everything—a new life, friends, and someone who might turn out to be more than a friend—and for what? For the dubious opportunity to be a man again? As if I had done a very good job in my former sex the first time!

It was as if I had always been running from myself—drowning myself in a bottle or trying to run from a second opportunity. How could I have been so stupid? I was young and attractive. So what if I was a girl? So what if I was black? And so what if my best friend—and maybe just a little more—was male and white? That's just the way it was going to be. Deal with it, people.

So it was a new and defiantly confident Marsha Henry who rejoined

her classmates for the end of the tour, but I was in for something of a surprise when I did. Looking around the room, there were friendly grins and whispered kudos as Pete and I melded with the crowd. Our classmates were actually proud of us! I guess it had been too long since I had had to think like a teenager. I had forgotten how such crazy stunts as finding a forbidden place to make out were actually marks of cool—no matter what else any of them might have thought of our relationship.

And I guess I hadn't realized that in the eyes of our classmates, Pete and I were officially an item. Oh sure, there were people like Yolanda and her friends who didn't think the relationship was right, but they were obviously in the minority on this point. Mr. Potter continued to give us disapproving glances as well. But the person who was most upset was Carole Sue Wilcox. The rest of the students knew she had been the one who snitched on me, and it was obvious to them now that her plan had backfired.

Pete sat next to me on the way back to the school, of course while Carole Sue had to sit next to Mr. Potter. It seemed as if none of the others wanted to sit with her. Pete held onto my hand so tightly that he must have thought I was in danger of floating away. It felt good, though. I found I actually liked having him hold my hand like that. It made me feel safe.

Our classmates were still congratulating us when we all got off the bus. I began to realize that most of the students had no problems with seeing Pete and me as a couple—even many of the black students. It was only a few who really had hidden agendas who were resentful. Maybe that was part of the black experience, though. Maybe most people were okay with the idea of blacks and whites mixing as equals and even in close relationships. Maybe it was just a few prejudiced people who by their vehemence made it seem that their attitude was the majority view.

And that warped sense of racial purity or whatever one wanted to call it wasn't limited to whites either. All I had to do was think of Yolanda and her friends or even my own father to realize that blacks could be

prejudiced as well.

“Can I walk you home?” Pete asked, almost shyly.

“Sure,” I smiled. “I need to go by my locker first. Just wait here.”

Pete offered to go in with me, but I wanted to go alone. I knew Pro would be waiting for me and I wasn’t disappointed. He was sweeping up in the hall, the smell of cleaning compound wafting through the air although the few straggling students didn’t seem to notice.

“You succeeded?” he asked, leaning on his broom as I opened my locker.

“Yes.”

“Turn toward me.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked warily.

“Just see what you saw,” he replied simply. I relaxed at that. I didn’t want him doing anything to me until I had a chance to explain something to him.

As I did so and felt a tingling in my mind as he pulled what he needed from my head. It didn’t hurt or anything, but it was as if I was being... violated. I didn’t like the sensation one little bit and vowed never to let it happen again. Fortunately, it was over in a few seconds.

“Of course!” he chuckled. “How simple it is.”

“Simple?” I managed to ask.

“Certainly. The ills of your world revolve around too few resources for too many people. Jupiter is using humans to develop a new energy source. Don’t you see? Oil will be unnecessary. The engine will run on air and light, completely free of pollution. The Middle East will be forced to integrate into the rest of the world, unable to blackmail the rest of the world with its oil. You see, we lack the technological mindset required to develop such an instrument. Jupiter’s plan is sound. Now I can recommend that the opposition to Ovid be ended.”

Pro was genuinely happy, so I didn’t want to burst his bubble. I knew a

thing or two about human nature, and I knew that mankind had developed a number of devices through the centuries which naïve individuals thought would either usher in a golden age for mankind, end war, or both. It was never that simple.

“Ovid is like Los Alamos,” he continued, almost talking to himself. “In World War II, your government established an entire town just to develop the atomic bomb—the very device we gods fear. Now Jupiter has used the same technique to save the world from conflict. Such symmetry!”

Such idealism, I thought in return, but I said nothing.

Pro now concentrated on me with a happy smile. “Now, it’s time for me to honor my part of the bargain.”

I should have felt relief, shouldn’t I? After all, this was the payoff for the deal I had made with Pro. I would get to be male again—and white. But relief wasn’t what I felt; I felt alarm, as if a loaded gun had been aimed at my head and was about to fire.

“Wait!”

Pro’s hand, which had risen to start some sort of arcane gesture, sank to his side while a look of puzzlement crossed his face. “What’s wrong?”

“I... I don’t want this. I don’t want to be a man.”

“If you’re worried about becoming addicted to alcohol again, I can change you so you have a complete aversion to it just as you do now,” Pro offered.

I shook my head. “No, it’s not that. Well, it is that, but it isn’t just that. I just... I don’t...” I couldn’t find the words to explain it to him. I realized now that I had agreed to his offer because I had been angry and frustrated. I realized also that I might even be happier if I could be a male and white once more. But in the balance, I had been ready to run from my new life headlong into another life because it seemed easier than facing my problems. Wasn’t that what I had done in my previous life as well when I turned to the bottle to transform my life?

“I want to try this life out,” I finally said. “I want to try to make it work.”

Pro surprised me by smiling. There was sudden understanding in his expression. “I think that’s a wise decision.”

I smiled back at him.

Changing the subject, he told me lightly, “But that leaves me in the position of owing you for the information.”

“You don’t owe me anything...”

“Yes I do,” he insisted. “My associates and I always pay our debts.”

He opened his hand and produced a delicate gold necklace with a small teardrop stone hanging from it. The stone was the color of amber, but it seemed to glow as if a tiny fire had somehow been trapped within in.

“Wear this as a reminder of my debt,” he told me as he handed me the necklace. The stone was actually a little warm to the touch. “If you ever change your mind—or if you need something else from me—just rub the stone and call out my name.”

A very girlish thought crossed my mind as I looked down at the necklace. I wondered just for a moment what outfits I had which might go with it. Then I looked up to thank Pro, but he was gone. I was alone in the hallway. I smiled and carefully put the necklace in a pouch in my backpack. A look at my watch told me Pro had slowed time again and only a couple of minutes had gone by. Still, Pete was waiting and I hurried so I could get back to him.

“You look happy,” he commented as we walked home together.

I thought about it for a moment. “I suppose I am,” I admitted. After all, my mission was over, I was back in my new mother’s good graces, a god owed me a favor, Carole Sue had gotten hers, and of course Pete and I were friends-who-were-maybe-more-than-friends again. And just to add a cherry on top of this sundae of life, I had come to realize that I could shape my own future without running away. I was a girl—a black girl—and I was going to stay that way for the rest of my life. It was up to me and me alone to make certain that life was a pleasant

one.

“You want to tell me what you were doing in that lab now?” he asked.

I shrugged. “It’s really a long story. How much time do you have?”

He looked at his watch. “I need to get home right now. Mom has some stuff she wants me to do. I suppose after dinner.”

“Look, mom told me she’s making lasagna tonight. I think she’s making enough to feed the Italian Army. You want to chow down with us?”

Pete looked a little uncomfortable. “I don’t know, Marsha. It’s pretty obvious your dad doesn’t like me.”

No, my new father was working hard to win the black Archie Bunker award. But I wasn’t about to let him get away with it. “Look, show up at six, okay? I’ll make sure dad is under control.”

Pete gave me a funny look. “What’s with you, Marsha? You seem more confident than before.”

“I am,” I told him simply with a smile and a quick peck on the cheek as we came up in front of my house. “See you at six?”

Pete grinned. “Sure. At six.” He gave me a little wave and headed off to his own house. Was it my imagination or were his feet several inches off the ground? I don’t think I realized until that moment just how much a girl can control a boy. I made a mental note never to forget it.

Dad’s car was in the garage next to mom’s, and I could smell the heavenly aroma of home-baked lasagne as I approached the house. “Set another plate!” I called cheerfully as I greeted mom and Jake. Mom was getting out dishes while Jake was cutting up veggies for a salad.

Mom looked at me happily. “You invited a friend?”

“Yeah, Pete Conway,” I replied nonchalantly.

“Oh boy!” Jake said rolling his eyes.

“Marsha...” mom began worriedly.

“Don’t worry, mom,” I assured her as I heard the sounds of the evening news blaring from the TV as dad enjoyed his evening ritual of a beer and Tom Brokaw. “I’ll tell dad.”

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” she asked me.

I smiled. “I’m sure.”

I strolled up to dad, bending to give him a hug and a quick kiss on his stubbled cheek. “Hi, daddy!”

“Hi, sweetie,” he returned with a smile.

I sat down on the arm of his chair. “Daddy,” I began slowly but confidently, “guess who’s coming to dinner...?”

“So what did her father say to that?” Susan was demanding as my trance faded and Marsha’s thoughts trickled from my conscious mind.

“Oh. I imagine everything went all right,” Diana said simply. She changed the subject by looking at my coffee cup. “Your coffee’s gotten cold. Let me heat it up for you.”

The smell of fresh—not reheated—coffee sprang from my cup.

“There’s something missing here,” Susan insisted. “All of these events happened nearly a month ago. Did Marsha’s dad accept Pete? Are they still going together?”

“That isn’t why Diana wanted to see Marsha’s story,” I told Susan, surprised that she hadn’t figured it out for herself. Maybe it was because although she spent a fair amount of time in The Judge’s courtroom, she didn’t have the almost constant contact with the gods that I did. I was starting to understand their convoluted thinking more than I would have liked to admit.

Diana just smiled at my comment, but I could see in her eyes the expression of a proud instructor, delighted that her pupil had mastered a difficult concept.

“What do you mean?” Susan asked, perplexed.

“What Diana wanted to see was if Marsha had figured out what had really transpired and why. The answer is that she didn’t. I suppose she never read the book.”

“What book are you talking about?” Susan demanded, frowning.

“Did you ever read Ayn Rand’s book—*Atlas Shrugged*?” I asked her.

“A long time ago,” she replied. “I was an undergrad at the time. It was one of those books everybody seemed to read. I thought it was sort of preachy and dated.”

I was a little disappointed in her assessment. It had always been one of my favorite books. “There’s a scene in the book where the heroine and her friend explore a deserted factory—in Wisconsin, I think. Sitting all by itself in one of the labs is a motor—a motor unlike anything they had ever seen before. It’s a motor that would revolutionize the world.”

Susan was quick to pick up on my observation. “And you’re trying to say that this fantastic motor was what Marsha and Pete saw in the lab.”

“Sort of,” I answered. “Pro had to be shown something he would have understood. As the Titan who gave fire to mankind, he would have understood the gods giving such a motor to us and would have appreciated the irony of the god who had punished him for dispensing technology now doing the same thing to help save mankind. But there’s irony and there’s irony. Pro didn’t understand the truly ironic twist Eric Vulman and The Judge had for him.”

“Which was?” Diana prompted.

“I said the scene sounded as if it was out of *Atlas Shrugged*. The title is derived from the idea that Atlas—a Titan as well, by the way—found the weight of carrying the world on his shoulders too much and simply shrugged the world off. So you see, The Judge used a scene from a book named for a Titan to fool another Titan.”

Susan looked at Diana. “Is this true?”

“It certainly is an interesting theory,” Diana replied, and I noticed she had not really answered the question.

“So let’s see if I understand your theory,” Susan said turning to me in her best courtroom manner. “You believe Eric Vulman didn’t turn didn’t turn Marsha and Pete over to The Judge because the powers that be had known all along that Pro would try to co-opt her.”

“It makes sense,” I told her. “After all, the train that brought Robert Wallace to Ovid wasn’t a real train. It was just placed there for him to find. Surely they were watching it all the time. They must have known Pro was on that train with Bob Wallace. My guess is that Pro didn’t make a move without The Judge observing it.”

Our eyes turned back to Diana, but she had already risen from the table. “Thanks for sharing the story with me,” she said formally. Then she added with a grin, “Have fun shopping.”

There were other questions we both wanted to ask her, but there was a soft puff of air as one second she had been standing before us and the next she was gone. At least she had left our coffee cups topped off with the fantastic brew.

“The more we learn, the more there is to know,” Susan sighed, taking a sip of her coffee. I just nodded in reply.

Was there such a motor, or was it merely a prop to make Pro believe that the gods’ plan to forestall a nuclear holocaust was a simple technological gift much as Pro and his followers might have devised? I felt in my heart that Pro had told Marsha the truth regarding the concern of the gods, but I had a sneaky hunch The Judge had not been equally forthcoming.

As Susan had said, there was still much to learn...

Ovid XVII: The Talking Head

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I breathed a sigh of relief as I saw the sign welcoming us to Ovid just ahead. It was ironic, I supposed. For here I was, one of the favored who could come and go from Ovid as I pleased, and yet I always looked forward to returning to the small town which had become my home. I know Susan felt the same way. I couldn't see the look on her face there in the back seat, but we had talked about it before.

Susan and Steven Jager had gone with my husband, Jerry, and me to enjoy a weekend in Oklahoma City sans kids. We had gone to an Oklahoma University football game down in Norman to appease Jerry and Steven, had a nice dinner together, done some shopping, and retired to our respective rooms where we enjoyed the opportunity to make love without the interruption of children.

We had driven back fairly early on Sunday. The clouds were building up as a cold front drifted in, promising freezing drizzle and miserable road conditions by afternoon. Of course, the weather would be a little better in Ovid with no drizzle to worry about. But Jerry wasn't aware of that since of the four of us, he was the only one who could not remember his previous life. If he had, he would probably be aware that the gods kept things a little more temperate in Ovid than the rest of the state experienced.

I wondered often what Jerry would think if he suddenly regained his memories of being Randy, a fraternity brother of mine. How would he cope knowing he was married to a woman who had once been his best friend—his best male friend no less? And what would he think, seeing his twins and realizing they, too, had been fraternity brothers of his? Then there was Ashley, the daughter we had given life to together. Maybe, I thought with a sigh, it was best that Jerry didn't remember any other life. The shock of learning what he had become—a husband and a father—might be too much for him.

We pulled up in front of Susan's house and were all surprised to see a police car at the curb.

"You forget to pay some tickets, Steven?" Jerry joked.

"Surely it's not a break in," Steven mumbled to himself. Crime was rare in Ovid for obvious reasons.

Even if I hadn't seen the officer standing by the car, I would have known it was Officer Mercer. Although people like Jerry didn't notice, people like Susan, Steven and I were well aware that Officer Mercer was the only patrol officer Ovid had—or needed.

"Something's wrong," Susan whispered to me under her breath as we all got out of the car. I was afraid she was right.

"The Judge needs to see you right away," Officer Mercer informed me without preamble. "You should be there too, Mrs. Jager."

"You guys go on with him," Jerry advised, oblivious to the danger the rest of us sensed. "Steven and I can pick up the kids at the sitter's."

I just nodded and joined Susan in the back seat of the police car.

"What's wrong?" I asked Officer Mercer once we were on our way.

"It's better if he explains it," he replied. I didn't ask again. As messenger of the gods, he would have told us only what The Judge wanted us to hear. His actions, however, told me a lot. Never had I been required to drop everything on a Sunday to attend to city business. Something very, very serious had happened.

We were ushered into the chamber normally reserved for city council meetings. The room was arranged with seating and a long desk for the council members at a raised platform with a gallery for about fifty observers facing the council desk. The Judge, in an expensive business suit, had taken the spot normally reserved for the mayor, and seated with him at the council desks were the highest members of the pantheon.

Even the gallery was half-full, the lesser gods and goddesses making up the majority of the spectators with a few trusted humans such as

Susan and I making up the rest. Diana, looking unusually demure in a dark blue dress, motioned us to come sit with her.

“What’s happening?” I asked her, my voice nearly lost in the drone of nervous voices around us.

“That’s what we want to know,” she replied cryptically.

Before she could add anything else, a gavel sounded. “I call this meeting to order,” The Judge said authoritatively. Silence was instantaneous and respectful.

“We have a potential crisis on our hands,” he began. “Rather than summarize what has happened, I have asked Mrs. Patton to attend this meeting and show us.”

I gulped. My talent for projecting the stories of Ovid’s residents into the minds of others had never been used on such a large group before. An encouraging nod from The Judge assured me that it would be no problem, though.

“Mrs. Patton, we must move quickly on the information we have just been given. Please access the file for Ashton Wells.”

“Yes, sir.” With a sigh, I concentrated my mind on the subject and began to flow into the familiar trance...

My co-anchor had just finished the typical light-hearted anecdote that ended all of our normal newscasts and Camera One was blinking at me once more. It was a medium shot, I knew, so the viewers would never know my hands were shaking in nervous anticipation. Trooper that I had always been, I gave my best professional smile for the camera and announced, “And that’s the news for this evening. Stay tuned to Newschannel Four for all the latest breaking news, and now it’s time for the Tonight Show with Jay Leno.”

As far as the viewers were concerned, my timing was accurate to a fraction of a second. Most of them would never realize that modern technology allows stations like KFOR-TV to capture a program on an advance feed and start it whenever the producer wants it to air. It was

a good thing, too, because my mind that evening was on something more important to me than accurate timing. My agent had called me earlier in the day, just before I had left for the studio.

“They loved it, Ash!” he gushed as soon as I picked up the phone.

“NBC?” I asked, my heart skipping a beat. “They liked the tape?”

“No, Ash,” Henry laughed. “They didn’t just like it—they loved it!”

This was it! It was my big break. For twelve years since leaving the University of Missouri with my journalism degree in hand, I had done everything I could to position myself for this moment. I was about to join the network as a correspondent. They’d probably base me in Dallas at first—or maybe Denver. It didn’t matter to me. I had gone from school to a small TV station in Springfield Missouri to another one in Albuquerque and one in Omaha. My latest move had been two years earlier to Oklahoma City and the top-rated television news department in the city. At least it was top-rated now. I had been brought in to anchor the ten o’clock news, and by all accounts, I had done a great job.

Now the waiting had begun. I wasn’t the only candidate for the NBC job, but Henry thought they were close to making a decision. That was great, because my contract with KFOR-TV was almost up, and if I was going to move on, this would be the perfect time.

Of course, I couldn’t tell anyone at the station. If things fell through with the network, I might have to extend my contract. I didn’t want to extend it too long, though. I just wanted to use the extension as a time period to fleet up to the network or at least to a larger market where I stood a better chance of being noticed by the network brass.

I practically ran back to my desk the second the studio lights dimmed. With any luck at all, my time in purgatory was about to end. I would be able to say goodbye to a city where the frequent tornadoes were the biggest news and move on to a prestigious network job. Who knows? I might even work my way up to a network anchor position. Move over Tom Brokaw, here comes Ashton Wells!

To my mixed relief and trepidation, my phone indicated I had a message from my agent. I couldn't very well take it at my desk. There were too many people milling around. Since the ten o'clock news is the most important local news time in the Midwest, the newsroom is busy then as well. I ducked into an empty conference room for a little privacy and called Henry.

"Ash," Henry answered on the third ring. My heart fell when I heard his voice. It was devoid of any enthusiasm.

"I didn't get it, did I?" I ventured with a sick feeling in my stomach.

"Sorry, Ash," he replied, confirming my suspicion. "They liked your tape: they really did. They said you were just the type of guy they were looking for, but..."

"But?" I prompted.

"Ash, most of your work has been just what you're doing right now—anchor assignments. They thought you were weak in the field. They said they wanted someone who had more time as a correspondent."

"But I was a correspondent in Springfield," I pointed out.

"Yeah," he countered, "and that was a few years back. Besides, whatever happens in Springfield—or in Oklahoma City for that matter?"

"Well, there was the Murrah Building..."

"Ash, that was almost ten years ago. That's old news as far as the network high-ups are concerned. What we need to do is get you out of the Bible Belt and up here in Chicago. I think I can get you an interview with WGN here in the city."

I thought about it for a moment. WGN was a big station all right. And it was picked up on cable and satellite, so I'd get plenty of national exposure. For that matter, I was originally from the Chicago area, and Henry had his office there. But there was a problem.

"Okay, Henry, but what happens if I get a job at WGN. Wouldn't I be a junior guy on the roster?"

“Sure. So what’s the problem?”

“I’d get the shit assignments,” I told him. “You know, I’d be covering the dog shows and traffic problems. I wouldn’t be getting the kind of work that would make the networks take notice.”

“But Ash, it’s WGN! So it takes you a little longer to work your way up. You aren’t going to get a network job down there in Injun Country watching the grass grow.”

I remembered back when Henry had lined me up with the Oklahoma City job and how he had called it a “savvy marketplace” and a “hot midsize market.” Now it was the Bible Belt and Injun Country.

“So Ash, you want me to pursue that WGN job?”

“Yeah,” I sighed, resigned to my fate. “Go for it.”

“Great!” Henry said cheerfully. “You’ll see, Ash. Chicago’s a savvy market.”

“Aren’t they all to hear him tell it,” I muttered out loud after he had hung up.

“Bad news?”

I looked up from my seat and saw Brenda Altman, one of our cameramen—or rather women—leaning against the door to the conference room.

“Come to gloat?” I growled. Brenda and I had taken an instant dislike to each other when I first arrived at the station. Of course, she knew I was looking to get a better job. Everyone at the station probably knew. It was the sacred ritual of contract renewal all on-air talent went through, and it was no secret that my contract was coming up for renewal.

“Hell no,” she shrugged. “Believe me, Ash, I like nothing better than to see you move on. I don’t give a damn if you end up replacing Dan Fucking Rather.”

“What have you got against me, Brenda?” I asked. “You’ve had a burr up your ass about me since I came here. What did I ever do to you?”

She swaggered over and took a chair down the table from mine. She could have been an attractive woman in her own way, but she carried herself like a man. I had never heard for certain what her sexual preferences were, but the story around the station was that when she indulged in sex (which she apparently did only rarely), it was with another woman. Not that that bothered me. I didn't much care which way she swung.

"You know, I'd think a smart guy like you would have figured it out," she told me. "You came down here a couple of years back and acted like you were God's gift to the broadcasting industry. Hell, the only thing you had done was anchor the news at some station in Omaha just before you came here—and it was the afternoon news at that."

I grimaced a little. Her words were hitting the mark. I suspected it was pretty much what the network people had told Henry. Henry had just been nice enough to make it sound more palatable.

Brenda saw she had drawn blood and continued, "You know the real hell of it, Ash? You have one of the finest deliveries I've ever seen."

I perked up a little. "A compliment—from you?"

She gave me another shrug. "Call it that if it makes you feel any better. What I mean is you know how to say the words real well. Hell, you're better at that than half the guys at any of the networks. You're one of the best talking heads I've ever seen. The problem is that that is the easy part and you don't seem to recognize it."

"Easy? What the hell are you talking about? It takes hours to put together a newscast as tight as the ones I do." I was pissed to the very core. "The reporters in the field spend half their time travelling to and from a story and while they're on the scene, they ask questions fed to them by someone else."

"That's not true!"

I pressed forward, "And all you have to do is point the damned camera wherever they tell you to. It's up to people like me to make people like you look good by presenting the stories in a way the viewers

appreciate!”

I was practically yelling at her by that point. Our voices had become loud enough that Dan Pollack, our producer got into the act. “Is there a problem, kids?”

“No problem,” I growled.

“Yeah, Dan, no problem,” Brenda confirmed, but there was menace in her voice. She saved her last remark for me before turning to leave. “I can tell you this, Ash, I want to be there when you do get out in the field on a big story. Then you can tell me how easy it is.”

I started to call out after her, but Dan grabbed my arm. “Let it go, Ash.”

“What?” I mumbled. “Is she pissed because her girlfriend’s got PMS?”

If Brenda heard that, she didn’t acknowledge it. She had already reached the door and hadn’t looked back.

“She’s not gay,” Dan told me.

“How do you know, Dan? Personal experience?”

“I thought your name was Ash—not Ass,” he chastised me. I backed off when I saw how pissed he was getting. I had already gotten one of my co-workers pissed at me. It wouldn’t do to get my producer pissed off as well. “She’ll tell you if she ever feels like it.”

As he walked away, I wondered what he had meant by that.

Normally, after a busy night I do a little pub-crawling and look for some sweet young lady who thought it would be cool to do it with a news anchor like me. It was my usual pattern, but I was too pissed to enjoy myself that night. I went back to my apartment and poured myself a healthy shot of scotch, gulping it down without bothering with ice or mix.

I’d show them. I’d show all of them what kind of a newsman I could be. When I was finished, I’d have Henry enthusiastically selling me to one of the networks. I’d have the network boys salivating to make me the next big name in network news. And I’d have Brenda Altman’s respect...

Downing my second scotch in record time, I wondered suddenly why I even bothered to worry about impressing Brenda. After all, she was just a camerawoman at a Podunk TV station in the middle of Tornado Alley. Granted, she did the best camera work of anybody on staff, but so what? She wasn't even that good looking or she'd probably be in front of the camera.

Well actually, she wasn't bad looking either. She was well-proportioned, about five-five in height. Her face was at best cute with a dusting of freckles and her hair was a sort of nice shade of dark brown even if she did keep it cut a little short and boyish. She probably attracted more dykes that way.

But no, Dan had said she wasn't a lesbian, and Dan had known her for a long time. Come to think of it, they had both worked together at a station in Little Rock before coming to Oklahoma City. Did that mean...

No, they weren't a couple. Dan was happily married with a couple of kids. They did get together for lunch sometimes, but it was always in a public place. And Dan was a pretty straight arrow and a likeable guy. I considered him a friend and so did Brenda. I wondered what it was about Brenda and me that made us oil and water.

Well, that wasn't worth worrying about. I had come up with a plan of action as I got ready for bed. The very next day, I'd be in Wally Moore's office. I would tell our esteemed news director that I wanted a field assignment and wanted it right now. I wouldn't take no for an answer. I had to get my ticket punched and punched quickly. Ashton Wells was meant for bigger things!

Wally Moore was a pretty good boss. Now in his forties, he had worked his way up in the world of television news wearing every imaginable hat in the department from office boy to producer to news director. KFOR was the third station in the Southwest where he had been news director, and he had managed to make all three of those stations number one in their markets. But it wasn't being a successful news director that made him proudest. He told everyone in the department that his proudest moments were as a field reporter—

earning him the nickname of Wally the Weporter behind his back. Of course, the fact that he was now a little pudgy and mostly bald had given him an unfortunate resemblance to Elmer Fudd, making the corruption of “reporter” in Fudd-speak even more appropriate.

“What brings you in so early today?” he asked me. I wanted to make sure I had a chance to speak with him before he took off for the weekend, so I had shown up in his office right after he got back from lunch—several hours before my shift began.

“I’ve got a favor to ask,” I told him bluntly, sitting across from his desk. He looked at me suspiciously. “What favor?”

“Let me handle a field story.”

He shrugged. “Why not? It’s nearly the end of the month. I’ll assign you a couple of features for next month.”

I shook my head. “Wally, I don’t want features. Let somebody else handle the filler stuff. I want hard news—something I can sink my teeth into.”

“Something you can use to impress the networks?” Wally added with a wry smile.

“Uh...”

Wally laughed and leaned back in his chair. “Come on, Ash, everybody in the station knows you want the big time. And a few of us even know you’re having trouble getting it.” When he saw my eyes widen, he explained, “Your agent has already been on the phone to me. And no, he didn’t tell me that—at least not in so many words. But it’s pretty obvious when he starts to turn up the heat on your contract renewal that he thinks he’s not going to be able to move you up this year.”

“All right,” I sighed. That meant WGN had probably turned sour, too. “Yeah, the network gave me a thumbs down.”

“Because you lacked field experience.”

I nodded reluctantly.

“I’ll make you a deal,” Wally said, going into his wheeler-dealer mode. “You extend your contract for two years with a... five percent boost in pay and I’ll get you some field work.”

“I’ll have to talk to Henry,” I warned him. Henry hated it when his talent tried to negotiate on its own. “And I’ll agree to one year with a seven percent boost.”

“Six percent and eighteen months.”

“If Henry agrees,” I allowed. “Now give me a story.”

He looked a little shocked. “You want one right now?”

“Of course I want it right now.”

Henry pulled a thin file that had been resting on a corner of his desk and scanned the contents. “Not much I can give you...”

“Come on, Wally! Don’t shit me.”

“I’m not shitting you,” he replied, somewhat offended. “Look, it’s Friday and it’s October. The legislature isn’t in session, elections are boring this year, and the only story anybody is really interested in is OU’s chances to be National Champion in football this year and it’s even a little early in the season for much on that story.”

“Surely you have something I can work on,” I pleaded. “I’ll even work on it this weekend.”

“Well...” he drawled thoughtfully, “I do have this one. I don’t have anybody who can follow up on it right now.”

I snatched the paper out of his hand and read it greedily. It was just a series of disjointed notes he had handwritten probably while on the phone. “Twelve year old girl, OU Med Center, runaway... Wally, what the hell is this crap?”

“The police called me with this info yesterday,” he explained. “It seems they found a girl about twelve years old stowed away in a truck yesterday. She was babbling something about a plot against her and claiming she was running away from some sort of place that doesn’t exist. They took her over to the mental ward at Deaconess but they

only handle adults. They moved her to Children's at the OU Med Center late yesterday until they could figure out who she is."

"You call this a story?" I huffed. "Hell Wally, she's a runaway—probably on drugs. She's probably really eighteen and running from her pimp. This happens every day. Even the newspapers don't have space to print it."

"So?" Wally replied. "Maybe there's a story there if you can find it. Anyhow, it's a slow news day, pal. It's all I've got. Take it or leave it."

I took it.

I wasn't even sure they'd let me in to see her. After all, she was just a little girl with her head not screwed on straight—probably from drugs. Twelve was a little young, but it wasn't unheard of. But Wally had assured me that I'd be able to get in to see her. Apparently, the hospital was actually anxious to let her talk to the media as part of her therapy. The little girl had been demanding media access and had refused to tell the doctors who she was or where she came from until she had talked to someone like me.

At least she was getting first-class care, I told myself as I pulled into the parking garage at the OU Med Center. And why not? As the medical branch of the University of Oklahoma, it was one of the best equipped, best staffed hospitals in the state—in the region for that matter. In spite of the mundane nature of the story, I felt pretty pleased with myself. Barging in to interview one of the center's patients must have made some of those hotshot doctors crap in their pants. The animosity between the media and the medical community is practically legendary.

"Ashton Wells to see..." I looked at the card Wally had given me. Stupid me. She hadn't given her name, had she? "...the little girl they brought in here from Deaconess," I managed to recover.

"Our little Jane Doe," the receptionist for the psychiatric ward noted. She didn't seem happy to see me. I imagined her bosses would be even less happy. "I'll take you to Doctor Allen."

I followed her through a buzzing door which was normally off limits to most visitors. It opened into a long hallway with offices and conference rooms on either side. I had halfway expected to be taken into the patient wing, but apparently they had decided that would be too disruptive.

Dr. Allen met me in one of the conference rooms, introducing himself with a firm handshake. He was young with a healthy tan and a shock of blond hair that could have used a trim. He looked decidedly unlike a doctor in his chinos, tennis shoes, and light green golf shirt. When he correctly interpreted my reaction, he chuckled, "We try not to look like doctors here. It sometimes scares the kids."

"I understand," I replied. Reporters often have the same problem. If we dress too formally in business attire, we find that some people don't like to talk to a suit. In fact, I was dressed much like the doctor.

After we were seated, Dr. Allen began, "I want you to know we don't normally do anything like this, but our Jane Doe is a most... unusual patient."

My ears perked up at that. When a doctor in a psychiatric ward calls a patient "unusual" it's music to a reporter's ears. "How so?"

Dr. Allen looked a little uncomfortable. "She claims to be a man," he admitted at last.

I leaned back, disappointed but barely holding back a laugh. "You can't be serious. She's—what—a twelve-year-old girl?"

He nodded. "About that age, yes. She won't even tell us her real age. She claims she's twenty-six years old."

"And she was magically changed into a young girl?" I asked derisively.

"Exactly. She claims she was changed into a girl in some town called Ovid. She says it was done magically to keep her from talking about some big defense project there operated by... I think it was called Vulstead or something like that."

"Vulman?" I suggested. I enjoyed his surprised look. I suppose shrinks

like him didn't have any reason to hear of Vulman Industries.

"You've heard of the company?" the doctor asked.

"Yeah. They make car parts and have a few defense contracts. I think they're headquartered over in Tulsa. Doc, you make this story of hers sound like a cross between sorcery and science fiction."

"Throw in mythology as well," he told me. "She claims she got changed into a girl by an old Roman god."

This was getting to be too much. I rose to my feet. "Well, Doctor, I'm sorry we both had to waste our time on this one. I'd better be getting back to the station."

Dr. Allen rose, too. "No, please don't go, Mr. Wells." He was silent for a moment, and I knew that what he had to say next hurt his professional pride. "Look, I realize this is an imposition. I hope your people told you that there wasn't really a story here..."

No, damn it, I thought. Wally hadn't told me that at all. But I should have figured it out all by myself before wasting an evening.

"...but we need your help. This girl is delusional and we need her to tell us the truth so we can find her parents or guardian and get their permission to treat her. If you'd just spend a few minutes with her, you'd really help us, not to mention helping a very disturbed little girl."

Well when he put it like that... I wasn't a heartless bastard. I suppose I could chalk it up to performing my civic duty. Of course, when I got back to the station, I'd tell Wally that whatever raise my agent was negotiating would have to be doubled before I'd consider it after the cheap stunt he'd pulled on me.

"All right, Dr. Allen," I agreed. "Let's see your patient."

Jane Doe—or whatever her name was—looked like a typical young girl approaching her teens. She was slumped in a conference chair designed for a much larger adult. She wore a white t-shirt that displayed small but promising buds that would be prominent breasts in a few years. Her jeans had seen better days, but sneaking out of town in the back of a truck was probably hard on a pair of girl's jeans that

had obviously been designed more for style than durability. Her long hair looked as if it had been recently brushed—probably by the staff, and she wore no makeup that I could see. In spite of that, she had a sweet, feminine face surrounded by hair that was so light brown in color it might have been mistaken for dark blonde.

She looked up at me with sad, tired eyes. “Who are you?”

Many people recognized me on sight. I supposed a young girl who probably had to go to bed before the ten o’clock news might not recognize me as readily. “I’m Ashton Wells,” I told her, offering a hand. “I’m with KFOR-TV.”

Her face brightened a little at that but she didn’t take the offered hand. “Are you really with a TV station? You aren’t just lying to get me to tell you who I am, are you?”

I sighed and pulled my media card out of my wallet. She grabbed it and studied intently. “It’s real,” I assured her.

She nodded, handing the card back to me. “I know. It’s a little worn. If it were fake, it would be new.”

Something told me this little girl had been watching too many spy movies. “So what is it you wanted to tell me?”

“Did you bring a recorder?” she asked.

I nodded and pulled a palm-sized unit out of my side pocket. “Right here.”

“Good,” she returned the nod in a disturbingly adult fashion. “Turn it on because you’re going to want to hear this again...”

I rushed back into the station nearly breathless. I had parked in one of the handicapped spots just to save a little time. Not that it mattered: there were half a dozen handicapped spots and only two station employees who used them. I only hoped Brenda was already there. She had been in her car closer to the office than I was when I called her. Even though she was already headed back to the station, she sounded pissed that I wanted to see her right away.

In my own defense, I couldn't help it. I was so excited that I didn't care who I pissed off. I was sitting on something big—really big—and I wanted to move on it quickly. When those stuffed shirts at the network heard what I had, they'd be begging me to go to work for them.

I dived into the nearest conference room and set up my recorder. Brenda was nowhere in sight, but our department secretary called her and found she was no more than five minutes behind me. Nervously, I waited for her to show up. It was ironic, I suppose, that the one person who disliked me the most at the station was also the one person I needed to help me break this story.

"What the hell was so damned important that you had to make me rush back here?" she stormed as she slammed the conference room door behind her. "I drove back here so fast I almost got killed. And what's with taking up a handicapped parking place?"

"It was necessary," I muttered, checking the recorder.

"Necessary? You don't look crippled to me, Wells. But if you don't tell me what this is all about pretty quick, I may see what I can do to cripple you."

I ignored her bad mood and looked her in the eye. "Did you hear about the little girl they've got over at the OU Med Center?"

"What? Oh, you mean the one who stowed away in that truck?" Her eyes widened. "Don't tell me Wally actually got you to follow up on that."

"You knew about it?"

"My God, Ash," she laughed. "I didn't think you were that anxious to be a reporter. Nobody wanted that story. Hell, it's probably just some little juvenile runaway who's probably already back home with her parents by now. Wally sent you out there to get you off his back!"

To her surprise, I smiled. "Well, the joke's on Wally this time. See what you think after you listen to this." I didn't wait for her to reply. I just started the recorder...

REPORTER (ME): So what is it you wanted to tell me... I don't even

know your name.

GIRL: My name is Doug Phillips, but everybody calls me Buster. Don't ask: I know how that sounds, but you've got to listen, man. You've got to hear my story. Okay?

Okay.

So here goes. Up until a few days ago, I was a man. Yeah, that's right—a man. I could have split you in half with one hand. At six four and weighing in at two-fifty, I was one mean motor scooter.

I was part of a club—a motorcycle club. We called ourselves the Screaming Eagles. Cute, huh? We were all from right here in Oklahoma City. Most of us had pretty decent day jobs—you know, construction and the like. It was a good life—work hard during the week and ride hard on the weekends. There were twelve of us who rode together. None of us were married. A couple had old ladies who rode with them, but usually we just found girls wherever we were.

Now don't get the wrong idea. We didn't cause any trouble. We'd just ride somewhere new every weekend, find a good biker bar, and drink beer, play pool, and look for women. That was pretty much the story—until last Sunday.

Only ten of us were riding last Sunday, but that was a pretty good turnout. We started early in the morning just after sunrise and were riding east. With fall coming on, it was probably going to be our last long ride and we wanted to make the most of the day. We had no particular place to go: we just rode, swinging off onto some back roads as soon as we started to reach the hill country.

Jake Walker was pretty much our leader. He was about my size—or rather, the size I used to be. If it wasn't for my brown hair and his blonde hair, we would have looked like we were brothers. Cal Brown was riding up with Jake and me. He was the same color as his name—a son of a black father and white mother. We called him Half-Breed when we wanted to make him mad. We tried not to make him mad very often, though. He was even bigger than either Jake or I. I swear you could see the frame of his Harley bend a little when he got on it.

The others rode behind us, not taking the chances the three of us did. They were all good riders: I'll give them that, but we three were the best.

"Where're the rest of the guys?" Cal asked suddenly.

I looked back in my mirror. We had just crested a hill maybe a quarter of a mile beyond the pack, but looking back, we seemed to be alone on the road.

"Maybe the wusses turned off," Jake suggested.

"No place to turn off," I yelled at him over the roar of our engines. By now, the three of us had cut back on the throttles and were cruising side by side.

"Shit!" Jake yelled, ready to pull off by the side of the road and wait for them. We followed him to the shoulder and let our engines idle.

"So where the fuck are they?" Cal asked after we had waited for nearly five minutes. Jake and I just shrugged.

I pulled my eyes away from the road behind us and looked ahead. There was a valley just beyond us, and spreading out over a good part of it was a town I hadn't noticed before. "Why don't we go on into town and get a beer while we wait for them?"

Jake pulled back the sleeve of his black leather jacket and looked at his watch. "Good idea," he said. "It's ten now, so the bars should be open."

"Unless this town's dry," Cal muttered, making reference to the hodgepodge of local liquor laws in Oklahoma that had caused us to go dry before.

Jake revved his engine. "Last one to the first bar buys!" Spraying gravel, he spun back onto the highway with Cal and I right behind him.

Cal got the dubious honor of buying the first round. It was no big deal, though. All three of us were working on government construction jobs where prevailing union wages were paid, so each of us had a healthy wad of bills stashed in our coats.

The place we found looked like a biker's dream. It didn't have one of those little cutesy names like 'Dew Drop Inn' or shit like that. The place was called 'Randy Andy's,' and it looked like just what the doctor ordered.

"Those guys are gonna be missing some serious drinking," Jake mused. "This place looks like a great place to spend the whole day."

He wasn't wrong. Some country-rock number was playing on the jukebox, pool balls were clicking from somewhere inside, and there was the smell of burgers on the grill. It might be Sunday morning, but there were already a few folks who looked like regulars sitting on the stools and in a couple of booths. Still there was something funny about the place. There was something about the way it smelled that didn't smell like most bars I knew.

I sniffed the air while Jake chuckled, "You smell it, too, huh?"

"Yeah, so do I," Cal remarked.

"There's no smoke smell," I noted. You know how most bars smell of stale smoke and even look a little hazy from the cigarettes? Well Randy Andy's smelled nothing like that. All you could smell was the food.

"Maybe there's no smoking in here," Cal suggested. That wouldn't bother him or me at all since neither of us smoked.

"There is now," Jake smiled, pulling out a Marlboro and sticking it in his mouth. Cal and I just shrugged. There wasn't anybody in this bar big enough to stop Jake from smoking if that's what he wanted to do.

Jake pulled out a book of matches and casually bent one out without tearing it. Closing the book, he struck the match against the cover. The match flared for a second and sputtered out.

"What the..."

He ripped the spent match and threw it on the ground. He was obviously pissed that his favorite little match trick had failed. This time, he tore a live match from the book and tried to light it. It sputtered like the first one.

“They must be wet,” I told him. He shot me a mean glance and absently stuck the unlit cigarette back in his jacket.

The three of us sauntered over to a table near the pool table. We sized up the two guys who were playing pool. They were both wimps, so I knew that once we had slammed down a couple of beers, we’d be chasing the wimps off and using the table until we found something better to do.

“What’s a guy have to do to get service around here?” Jake yelled as we were still scraping chairs across the floor. He always did that, no matter how fast the service was.

It looked as if there were only two people working that morning—a lanky guy with a sharp nose and thinning hair tended bar. The only waitress was a fine little blonde who looked as if the last thing in the world she wanted to do was wait on our table. She wore a short skirt and a pair of sneakers. I couldn’t help but think she’d look a whole lot better in heels.

“Three Buds here!” Jake ordered before she was half way to the table. She scurried back to the bar where the thin guy was already uncapping them. I just figured she must be new—or maybe a part-timer they were breaking in on a Sunday morning. After all, most people in small towns went to church on Sundays, so the crowd was probably always light.

She plopped the beers down in front of us without a word, obviously anxious to get away as soon as she could. But she was a cute little thing and I just couldn’t resist. I threw an arm around her and pulled her closer. “What’s your name, babe?”

“Sh... Shelly,” she managed. The way she said it made me wonder if it was her real name.

“You live here in town?” I asked conversationally while my friends leered at her boobs.

“I... I do now,” she mumbled. I figured she must have just moved to town.

“You wanna have a cold one with us?” I asked, while Cal added softly, “...or three hot ones?” Jake about fell out of his chair laughing.

“She’s working all day today,” the bartender called out in warning. “She doesn’t have time to sit with the customers.”

I let her go. Not that the bartender scared me: I just knew the routine. We’d make nice as long as nobody really crossed us. We might look like bad dudes, but if we didn’t show up for work the next day, we’d be fired, so cooling our heels in some tank water town jail didn’t seem like a good idea.

Once we’d each downed four or five beers, it was time to play some pool. We ran off the local wimps and set up for a game of cutthroat. Sure, we got a little loud and a little obnoxious, but nothing to justify what happened next. Of course looking back on it, even if we’d been sitting at the table quietly sipping our beers like little old ladies at afternoon tea, the same thing would have happened. Only the excuse would have been different.

The small crowd in the bar got real quiet when the cop walked in. I didn’t know why at the time, but I was about to learn. The cop was tall and slender, not bothering to remove his dark glasses in the dim light of the bar. The nametag he wore identified him as ‘Mercer.’

“Hello, boys,” he said calmly, as if he were addressing choirboys instead of big bikers.

“Officer,” Jake nodded, sipping his beer. We tried to be reasonably polite to cops. As I said, we didn’t want any trouble.

“I’m going to have to ask you boys to come down to the station with me,” this Officer Mercer told us.

Jake frowned. “What for? We haven’t done anything.”

“Well, that’s not quite true,” the cop said lazily. “Those mufflers on your bikes have been boosted.”

“So?” I asked that.

“So that makes them illegal here in Ovid,” he informed us.

Technically, he was right: the pipes weren't exactly legal. Some bikers did it to increase performance, but the real reason was to make a real badass noise when revving the bikes. It sort of announced our presence, you know? But even though he was right, we hadn't tinkered with the pipes enough to really break the law—just bend it a little. We'd been stopped by cops before, but they always let us go. Something told me this Mercer guy wasn't going to be like the other cops. Little did I know then just how unlike other cops he really was.

"Come on, boys."

We could have argued, but sometimes in small towns, that's just what the cops wanted you to do. That way, they'd have a good reason to haul you in for a couple of days and lay a big fine on you. Reluctantly, we all rose to our feet.

He had all three of us ride in the back seat behind the typical mesh divider. It wasn't easy getting three guys our size in that one car seat, and even the cop had sense enough not to get on us about not fastening our seat belts. There was so much meat in that seat that we couldn't have buckled the belts if our lives depended on it.

"Hey! What about our bikes?" Jake wanted to know.

From my position in the back seat, I could see Officer Mercer in the rear-view mirror. I could swear he actually managed a small smile.

"They'll be taken care of for you, boys."

The cop shop was in City Hall. No big surprise there. I had been riding in the middle of the seat, so I was relieved the ride had been a short one. I had been sitting up so high I hadn't even been able to see out the windows.

The only reason I mentioned that is to point out that I hadn't seen very many people on the streets. After all, it was now early Sunday afternoon, and Randy Andy's had been practically deserted. Whatever the locals were doing didn't involve walking around town, so it wasn't until I alit from the car that I saw my first shade.

Don't rush me, damn it! I'm getting to what a shade is. Of course, I

didn't know then that that was what the transparent people were called. That's right: they were transparent—or nearly so. It turns out they're kind of stand-ins for real people. They look and act human, though. The one I saw first was just a janitor. He was taking a sack of trash over to a nearby dumpster when I saw him. At first, I thought it was just an optical illusion—caused by the sun or something. But then as I looked at the guy a little closer, I could see the building right through him if I concentrated real hard.

"What the hell..." my voice trailed off.

Cal and Jake looked at me as if I was light in the head. I stared back at them but said nothing. They had seen the janitor too, but apparently saw nothing unusual.

"Come on, boys," Officer Mercer ordered. I promptly put the odd appearance of the janitor in the back of my mind. We all had more important things to worry about.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" Jake demanded as we were led immediately to three cells in the back of the cop shop.

"Just a precaution boys, until The Judge gets here."

We were all a little riled, but we stepped into the cells and let him close the door behind us with a resolute clang.

"So when do we see this judge?" Jake wanted to know.

"First thing tomorrow," Officer Mercer told us, closing the cell door behind us before we could protest.

"Shit!" Cal muttered. "We're gonna get fired for sure."

"Maybe not," I told him from the next cell. As proof, I reached in my pocket and pulled out my cell phone. "I'll call the super and let him know what happened."

"Hey, how come they didn't take that from you?" Jake asked. "Come to think of it, why didn't they take any of our stuff? They just threw us in here. For all they know, we could have guns or something."

"I got a knife," Cal volunteered, reaching in his pocket. He looked

puzzled for a moment. "Or I did have a knife. It must have fallen out of my pocket."

I watched the screen of my phone, expecting it to find a cell pretty quickly, but nothing happened. "Damned town must not have cellular service," I muttered, throwing the useless phone onto the cot that passed for a bed in the cell.

"I thought everybody had cell coverage," Cal remarked. "My uncle lives in a little burg over in Missouri that can't be a third the size of this one and he's got cell coverage."

"Shame we didn't get jailed there," Jake snorted.

So the long and short of it was that we had nothing we could do but wait.

It was a pretty boring evening. About the only bright spot in our evening was when a cute black policewoman came in with our dinners. The food was good, but the view of the cop—I think her name was Wanda—was even better. Cal tried to make time with her, but she just smiled and left us to our meal.

The next day, all three of us were given the opportunity to shower and shave before getting dressed for our court appearance. We were pretty calm about the whole thing, I guess. We had all gotten a good night's sleep since there wasn't anything better to do. We expected to get hauled before the judge, get fined, and hit the road, hopefully making it back to Oklahoma City by noon where we would explain what had happened to our super and hopefully be allowed to keep our jobs. If I had known what was really going to happen, I would have made a break for it no matter what happened. Anything would have been better than what happened.

They appointed a court lawyer to plead our case. Like the cop the night before, she was damned attractive. She introduced herself as Susan Jager.

"You think we'll get off without a fine?" Jake asked hopefully.

"I don't think The Judge will fine you," she said confidently. But of

course looking back on it, she knew we weren't going to get a fine. She must have known exactly what was going to happen to us. Even in Ovid, lawyers just aren't worth a piss.

We never did get the judge's name. Officer Mercer, acting as bailiff, just called him "The Judge," as if that was his name. Of course, it wouldn't have nattered what he had called himself from the bench. I found out later who he was, though.

So we all stood up and listened to the charges—disturbing the peace, unlawful modifications to our bikes, being public nuisances and so on. I'm surprised he didn't get us for spitting on the sidewalk, too. I'm sure I did that at least once.

"How do the defendants plead?" The Judge asked our attorney.

"Your Honor, my clients were not aware that the modifications made to their motorcycles constituted..."

"Not being aware of the rules isn't a valid excuse," The Judge reminded her. "I take it then that counsel will concur that illegal modifications were in evidence?"

Our attorney flushed. I figured she must be pretty new at the legal stuff since she was so young. "Yes, Your Honor."

The Judge looked at us. "In that case, the court finds you guilty of illegal modifications to motor vehicles. Sentence will be carried out at once."

As his gavel banged down, I realized that the whole procedure had been nothing but a scam. I had been in court a couple of times on minor violations, but I had never seen a judge do what this one had done. Technically, we never entered a plea and he never pronounced sentence on us. It didn't matter, though. What he did to us wouldn't even be possible in any other courtroom in the world. He muttered something in some foreign language—I don't know which one—and I began to feel my body changing.

It's really almost impossible to describe the sensation. It wasn't painful, but the best way I can think of to describe it is something

between an itch and that funny sensation you get when your foot falls asleep.

Oh yes, and I lost total control of my limbs. It felt as if I were being propped up as my body got smaller and smaller. I could at least turn my head and see what was happening to Cal and Jake. They were growing smaller as well and everything about them was slowly changing, like those morphing pictures you see on TV. Their jeans were changing color from dark blue to a lighter green. Their leather jackets had disappeared entirely and the t-shirts under them were becoming crisp white shirts with a band of green matching the skirt travelling from their right shoulders to the left side of their waists.

Jake was becoming darker—his skin becoming brownish and his hair long and black as coal. As for Cal, his skin had lightened until it was a rosy pink. Long blonde hair curled down over his shoulders. I didn't have to look to realize that my own hair had become longer as well, tickling as it ran down my neck and covered my ears. Since I had always kept my hair fairly short, I was surprised to find I could actually feel the increased weight from it. Cautiously, I managed to take hold of a few strands of it and hold it in front of my eyes. It was still brown, but a little lighter than before and much softer than I had imagined.

Something was happening between my legs. I looked down and saw I was wearing a skirt—a skirt damn it—the exact same color as the ones Jake and Cal now wore. I gasped as I reached under the skirt and found nothing but smooth skin covered in silky panties.

Now I might have just been a plain old construction worker, but I knew what was happening to me—I was becoming a girl. All three of us were becoming girls, and young girls from the looks of things. The green bands had resolved themselves into sashes with colorful little patches on them. My god, we were Girl Scouts, I realized, probably no more than thirteen or so.

“Thank you, Your Honor,” the little girl who had been Jake said suddenly in a high, sweet voice. I looked in astonishment as she stood there with a form in her hand which she was diligently filling in. “Yours is the biggest order yet!” She grinned, her Native-American features

evident.

“Yes, thank you, sir,” the girl who had been Cal said with a real Shirley Temple smile.

“Now remember, girls,” The Judge admonished us, “that order needs to be split three ways so each of you gets credit for part of it.”

“Oh we will,” the Jake girl promised him. “Jennie and Chelsea are my best friends.” She looked at the two of us and I knew at once I was now either Jennie or Chelsea. I was a girl... a girl!

Part of me wanted to stop right there in front of The Judge and demand to be returned to my real appearance, but the Cal girl was leading me out by the hand, giggling as she did so. I was too stunned to do anything except follow her. I know there had to be a look of confusion on my face, but why were Cal and Jake handling everything so smoothly? It was as if they had been born girls.

I felt so stupid as I walked out of the courtroom with them. There we were, identically dressed—or nearly so. The Cal girl and I were wearing knee-length green socks while the Jake girl wore green tights, but there was no mistaking any of us for what we appeared to be—three young girls busily selling Girl Scout cookies.

“How did you girls do?”

The other girls (other girls... shit!) stopped giggling and we all turned to see an attractive woman whose features closely resembled the ones Jake now displayed. “Great, Mom! The Judge bought sixty boxes from us. Even after we split the sale up, I’ll bet we’re way ahead of the rest of the girls.”

The woman smiled, brushing a strand of long, black hair out of her face. “That’s great, Joanne.” So that was Jake’s name now. “What are you guys going to do now?”

“Go over to our house and goof around,” Jake—no, it was Joanne now—said.

I must have shuddered. I had visions of what that meant. I had had a little sister and I knew that for girls the age I was now, ‘goofing off’

meant sitting in one girl's room trying on clothes, sharing makeup tips, and discussing boys. For my two formerly male friends, those activities didn't seem to be much of a reach, but for me it would be hours spent in a feminine hell.

"Are you all right, Chelsea?" the woman asked me.

So that was my name now. I was Chelsea. I was toast.

"I... I'm fine," I replied, hearing for the first time my girlish voice. I read somewhere that a person's voice sounds deeper inside than when heard by others. If that was the case, the sound others heard from me had to be even higher pitched and more feminine than it did to me, and that just didn't seem possible.

The three of us walked out of the courthouse and I followed the other two to where our bikes were parked. When I say bikes, I don't mean the powerful hogs we had ridden into Ovid. These were small girl's three-speed bikes—one pink, one yellow, and one a light blue. I took the yellow one when the other girls got on their bikes. Well, at least I hadn't drawn the pink one, I thought.

The afternoon was just as bad as I thought it would be—trying on clothes and experimenting with makeup. I had to go along with them or I would have been thought odd. I had a fear at the time that I was supposed to think just like they did only something had gone wrong. I even found out that if I let myself sort of drift mentally, I could fall into a subconscious pattern that had me acting like the girl I had become. That really worried me, for I didn't want to lose my real self in some girlish delusion.

I found out later that some of The Judge's victims lose their old memories and some didn't and everyone had access to that ability to drift on automatic. But at the time, I was afraid that I'd be found out for retaining my old thoughts and be sent back to The Judge to have my memories wiped.

I found out over the next few hours that I was actually twelve years old. My full name was now Chelsea Anne Bridgewater and I was in the seventh grade. My parents both worked—my new father sold cars at a

local GM dealership and my new mother was a secretary for the Ovid School Board. I was an only child, so at least I didn't have to worry about siblings.

Thank God it was still the weekend, because if it was any other time of the week, I'd be in school and have to act like a twelve-year-old girl most of the time. As it was, it turned out I was a latchkey kid and had a fair amount of time to myself during the school week. Without that time, I think I might have fallen into the role of Chelsea a lot faster...

You see... God! I'm embarrassed to talk about this but I guess I have to. It's like this—whenever I had to act like the twelve-year-old girl I appeared to be, like at school, it started to become more and more natural. I found I was starting to think like a young girl.

It was especially bad when Joanne and Jennie were around, which was too damned often. I think The Judge set things up so that the three of us were almost inseparable. I had to fight with every ounce of mental strength I could muster to keep from falling into the girl role almost as completely as Jake and Cal had. What made it even more embarrassing was that at least they had an excuse. Their memories of their male lives had evaporated, leaving them just the girls they seemed to be. But me? I had my real memories, but try being treated like a pre-teen girl for a few days and see what happens to you.

I suspect that there was something residual in The Judge's magic, too—something that would make me slowly start adapting to my new role whether I wanted to or not. At least I hope that was the case. I'd hate to think I was becoming more girlish on my own.

That was why I made up my mind that I had to get away from Ovid—before I became Chelsea Anne Bridgewater in mind and spirit as well as in body. Ideally, I would have liked to have been changed back into a man before getting away, but I couldn't see any way to make that happen. The Judge sure wouldn't have any reason to change me, and I didn't know of any other god who could do it.

Didn't I tell you that? Well, I guess I didn't want to say anything or you'd really think I was crazy, but that's who changed me—a real

honest-to-goodness Greek god. Or maybe he's Roman. I never could remember the difference. You see The Judge is Jupiter. Funny, I couldn't say that when I was in Ovid. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to say it here either. Whatever magic The Judge has keeps residents in Ovid from talking about it.

Anyhow, I knew I wouldn't be able to change back before leaving Ovid. I had to just figure out a way out of town. Then once I had convinced someone out of that weird place that I was telling the truth, I figured I could go with them back to Ovid, along with a company or two of Marines, and force The Judge to change me back.

Yeah, I know what you're thinking—how was I as a twelve-year-old girl going to convince the authorities. Well, put yourself in my shoes for a moment and consider: what other choice did I have? Any other option would have ended up with accepting my life as a girl like some of the others did.

Oh yes, there were others who were like me. I didn't know it at first, but eventually I met some other kids. Most of them were like Joanne or Jennie—or they were shades. But there were a few like me who remembered who they were. That didn't do me much good, though. It turns out that only two people can talk about what's really going on in Ovid. When a third person joins the conversation, all you can do is act like who you've been changed into—or say nothing at all.

The reason I mention that is that it was very hard for me to find someone to talk to. Young girls seem to travel in packs, so I had to either act like a twelve-year-old girl and talk about boys and clothes and all of that crap or shut myself in my room and do nothing. Once the school year started, it was even worse. So I tried to adapt: I really did. Some of the other kids who remembered their old lives did get a chance to talk to me every now and then and told me it was really the only thing I could do.

I believed them too, until I got an idea...

Cindy Tolbert, one the girls in my class, and I were at Duggan's one day. Duggan's is a supermarket—one of those IGA stores. Anyhow,

when we left Duggan's, I noticed there was a produce truck unloading behind the store. There was an Oklahoma City address on the side of it, and I wondered how delivery trucks could be coming into Ovid unless people like truck drivers knew about the town. Then I noticed something funny. The driver had sort of a glazed expression, as if he didn't really know where he was. Oh, he was acting normally enough, but it was as if he wasn't really aware of exactly where he was. I wondered if supply trucks came into town with the drivers sort of hypnotized and left town with them not remembering where they had been. It wouldn't be too tough for a guy like The Judge to pull that off, I thought.

"What are you staring at?" Cindy asked me.

Vaguely, I recalled that Cindy was talking about some 'hunky' guy in our class. Like me, Cindy had been male once upon a time, but unlike me, she was all girl now in mind as well as body, even though she remembered her old life. With her blonde hair, blue eyes, and rapidly developing figure, I had no doubt that in a few years, she'd be real cheerleader material—probably managing to get screwed by the high school quarterback while loving every minute of it. Still, she had been a big help to me advising me how to fit in better.

"Hell-o-o!" she chided me.

"Sorry," I responded at last. "I was just thinking. How is it that nobody outside of Ovid knows the town is here but delivery trucks still get here?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I guess the g... g... I mean I guess the people who run Ovid figured out a way to make people forget they were here. Have you been to any football games yet?"

I shook my head.

"Well," she continued, "it's really weird. Other high school teams come into town to play us, and when they come, they bring the band, fans, cheerleaders, and the whole enchilada. They always act a little distant, though. I hear when they leave, they forget all about this town."

So I had been right! Outsiders could enter and leave Ovid if the gods had no interest in them. Only they would forget Ovid even existed once they left. That meant there might be a way to get out of Ovid. Of course, there was the possibility that the gods had some sort of tripwire that would alert them to when one of their transformed residents was trying to leave. Cindy had told me stories about people who were caught trying to leave. The consequences weren't always slight. But I suspected there would be a way around their traps if I looked hard enough.

I knew whatever I did to get out of Ovid, I'd have to do it fast. Cindy had warned me that there was more to the magic than just the physical transformation. Before long, she said, I'd start to think like a girl. I realized it was already starting to happen. Things that used to interest me—football, bikes, pool, and drinking beer, for example—seemed unimportant. On the other hand, romantic movies, boy bands, and looking nice were starting to intrigue me—just a little that is. I'd find myself thinking of things like that in unguarded moments. Hell, I even caught myself looking with approval at a couple of guys in my classes. Somehow, it didn't seem so perverted to think about a little innocent social activity with guys.

It's hard to describe what was starting to happen to me. It was so subtle that I sometime just sort of drifted into absolute girlhood. Getting ready for school would somehow lead to unconsciously applying lipstick and a little blush. Talking with cute boys would start me giggling senselessly. A discussion with other girls about some hot new male actor would find me imagining what it would be like to be in his arms. Then suddenly, I'd just snap out of it—like waking after a bad dream.

The problem was those girlish thoughts were becoming stronger with each passing day. Cindy warned me that by the time my periods started (as hers already had), I'd be a one-hundred percent heterosexual girl ready to chase boys and enjoy it when they chased me.

But on the other hand, it wasn't going to be that easy to get away. I

had come to the conclusion that the best way to get out of Ovid would be in one of the big delivery trucks that dropped off food at the supermarket every day. I knew from past experience that the best ones would be the ones that brought produce in. They were refrigerated, but not so cold that I would freeze to death. But they would be cool enough to counteract the warm Oklahoma sun. The difficulty of getting out of the house and finding the right truck caused me to delay my departure.

I think it was when Brian Evans asked me to the next after-game dance that I finally resolved I had to do something and do it quickly. Brian was a good-looking guy: there was no denying that. Half the girls in my class would have given a tit—small as they were—to have him ask them out. I suppose I should have felt honored, but what I felt was terrified. A boy had actually asked me out! Shit!

Actually, I told him I'd go out with him. Of course I had no intention of doing so, but he wouldn't know that. He was real but didn't seem to remember any previous life. That meant he'd have no reason to suspect I was lying to him. I only agreed to go in case The Judge had spies in the school. I wanted everyone to think I had given in to my female body. Hah! I'd never do that. In fact, I wanted to get the hell out of Ovid as quickly as I could, and definitely before I had to go out on a date.

It actually turned out to be easier than I thought it would be. I sneaked out of the house in the middle of the night. I had left my bike hidden by the side of the house, so I wouldn't have to walk all the way to Duggan's. I thought as I pedalled how much better it would have been to have a real bike under me—a bike with the name Harley-Davidson on the side.

I couldn't believe my luck. There was a produce truck unloading as I rode up to the store. I hid my bike in some bushes and sneaked over to the side of the truck. I heard muted conversation coming from the back room of the supermarket. It seemed the driver had unloaded everything for Duggan's and was having a cup of coffee with the night manager before heading back to Oklahoma City. There was nothing in

the back of the truck but a few empty flats. I sneaked in behind them, hoping the driver wouldn't remember to turn down the air conditioning as he left.

The rest you know. I had been right. No one stopped us on the way out of town, and by yesterday morning, I was here in Oklahoma City. You should have seen the faces of the driver and the warehouseman when they opened the truck and found me standing there. Of course, they called the police at once. Then they started contacting every town along the driver's route when I refused to give them my name or tell them where I was from.

I wasn't worried, though. The driver had no idea he had been in a town called Ovid. And there was no paperwork identifying the town, either. Whatever The Judge's motives for keeping the town a secret, they would mean the police would have no way of contacting the Ovid authorities to identify me. I was free!

REPORTER (ME): So you got away, but do you have any idea what this Ovid is all about?

GIRL: My God, does that mean you believe my story? No, don't answer that. I couldn't stand it if you started laughing now. Okay, I'll answer your question.

The truth is I have no idea what Ovid is all about. Maybe it's some sort of Top Secret project. Maybe the gods are working for the government. Maybe it's just a big joke—you know—maybe the gods have just set up the town to have something to play with. You're the reporter. If you want to know what's going on there, go there yourself. All I want is for somebody to find a way to change me back and give me back my old life.

And before you ask, no, no one seems to have heard of a Douglas 'Buster' Phillips. For that matter, nobody's heard of a Jake Walker or a Cal Brown either. I know. I've asked. I even managed to get a phone and called my sister. You know what she told me? She said she never had a brother—and if she did have one, I certainly didn't sound like anybody's brother.

But if I'm lying, why is it the authorities can't find my parents? And how is it that I know so much about motorcycles and construction? How can I name people I know but they don't seem to know me? Tell me the truth: do I sound like a twelve-year-old girl to you?

...I turned off the tape recorder. "Well, what do you think?" I asked. "Does she sound like a twelve-year-old girl?"

"No..." Brenda admitted slowly. Then she frowned. "But you don't really believe that crap about gods and magic do you?"

"I don't know what to believe," I told her honestly. Like Brenda, I found it a little hard to believe the ancient gods of Rome were hunkering down in a little nowhere town changing men into women. "But I do believe there's a story here."

"Ash," she argued, "you're just determined to find a big story. Take some advice, okay? This isn't the big story. This is just the ramblings of a delusional little girl who happens to be a good actress."

"Maybe," I admitted, "but if she's acting, there should be a special Oscar for her—best performance in a non-movie role or something like that. Look, Brenda, you need to meet this girl. Then decide for yourself."

Brenda looked puzzled. "Decide what?"

I smiled. "Decide whether or not you'll go to Ovid with me."

"I don't know how I let you talk me into wasting a perfectly good Saturday night on this," Brenda muttered as we hustled through the doors of the OU Med Center.

"Think of it as an adventure," I chuckled. I knew I had piqued her curiosity. Even though Brenda could never have been persuaded to help me as a friend (since no one would make the mistake of calling us "friends"), she was enough of a news junkie to take the chance that there might actually be something to the girl's story.

I was sure that like me, Brenda was convinced that there were no such things as Roman gods traipsing around the Oklahoma countryside. To even imagine such a thing would have taken an

absolutely delusional mind. But I couldn't help thinking something strange was going on. Twelve year old girls didn't just fall out of the sky—especially twelve-year-old girls who knew enough about motorcycles to be a member of Hell's Angels.

In spite of the fact that Brenda and I were hardly friends, I was certain that once she had met our mystery girl, she'd be as intrigued as I was. Then once the curiosity bug had taken a big bite out of her skepticism, we'd be off to find the elusive town of Ovid.

Dr. Allen had left for the day, and the nurse we were referred to seemed to have about as much regard for the media as she did for ants at a picnic. "Chelsea Anne Bridgewater, you say?"

"That's right," I confirmed. "We're here to see her." To press home my credentials, I added, "Dr. Allen had me speak with her earlier today."

"Dr. Allen isn't here."

"I know that," I said as patiently as I could. "But I assume Chelsea is still here."

There was obvious delight in her nasty smile as she told us, "Then your assumption would not be correct."

That wasn't the answer I had expected, of course. "Has she been moved to another hospital?" I asked.

"Her parents came to claim her," the nurse said exultantly. "I know who you are, Mr. Wells. One of the other nurses told me you'd been here earlier. I know how you media people like to turn everything into a circus for your viewers, but this is one time it won't happen. Imagine! Upsetting that little girl like you did. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Brenda was rolling her eyes, although whether it was over the nurse's performance or because I had coaxed her into giving up her Saturday night to accompany me, I couldn't really say.

Then a thought struck me. There might still be a story here if I proceeded cautiously. "Uh..." I began hesitantly, "...how did they identify their daughter? Did they finally report her missing? What took

them so long to report her?" It was a shotgun questioning technique. A single question might have been deflected, but by raising so many questions at once, I managed to put the nurse on the defensive.

"The paperwork is all in order," she replied, but not as smugly as she had earlier.

"May I see it?"

She eyed me suspiciously. "Those are confidential records. You just want to see them to identify her parents so you can go bother them."

Actually, that was true, but I wasn't about to admit it. "Our viewers have already been told the little girl's story," I lied smoothly. "Unless we see proof that she was properly returned to her parents, I'm afraid we'll have to raise those questions on the air. Now let me see, for the record, your name is...?"

She was smart enough to know I could make her look stupid if I raised questions on the air about the legality of the girl's release from the hospital. "Oh very well," she finally sighed, grabbing a folder from her desk. "But you are not to bother Mr. And Mrs. March or their daughter."

"I thought her name was Bridgewater..."

"It's March," she corrected me, a little of her smugness returning.

"See? It says so right here on the documents they copied for us."

Brenda gasped but I don't think the nurse heard her. I barely managed to hold back a gasp of my own, for the paper the nurse showed us—a paper she had just looked at herself—was, in fact, completely blank.

"Do you believe me now?" I asked as we pulled out of the parking lot in the pool car I had checked out from the station.

"I don't know what to believe," Brenda admitted. "All I know is that the nurse back there was convinced that she had a valid document. But why weren't we convinced?"

"I suspect we aren't part of the equation," I replied. "The document only had to be convincing for the hospital staff. My guess is that

whoever took the girl didn't want a paper trail, so they made the staff believe the documents were valid."

"Then you believe this 'god' stuff?"

I shook my head. "Not necessarily. My guess is that both the girl and the staff at the hospital have been exposed to some advanced form of hypnosis or drugs. The girl was made to believe she had once been a man..."

"And the staff was made to believe they had a valid release order," she finished for me. She was smiling, so I guessed she had reached the same conclusion.

"Who do you think is behind this?" I asked. "The government?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. It could be a private company, playing around with a new drug."

"Well, there's only one way to find out. We have to retrace the girl's route."

Brenda turned to face me. "And how do you expect to do that? Oh wait a minute... you still think this town of Ovid is real, don't you? You plan to stow away on one of those produce trucks and find it."

I nodded. "Have you got a better plan?"

"Yeah. Leave it alone."

"I thought you were a newsperson."

She sighed, "Look, Ash, I know we don't always get along, but take some advice, okay? If the government is behind this, you'll never be allowed to write your story, let alone broadcast it on the ten o'clock news. Even if it's a private drug company, they'll probably be strong enough to suppress the story. Let me talk to Wally. He likes me. I'll ask him to give you a real story to work on."

"This is a real story," I muttered. Then I added, "And I'm a real reporter—no matter what you think."

"That's why you're doing this?" she asked incredulously. "You're doing

this to impress me?”

“You said you wanted to be there when I tried to get a big story, Brenda,” I reminded her. “Well, this is your chance. You don’t think this is a big story, but what if you’re wrong? What if I can find out what’s going on and bring the story in?”

Brenda was silent the rest of the way back to the studios. I remained silent also. I really wanted her to accompany me to this strange town of Ovid, but I had said all I could think of to convince her. If she decided to do it, it would be to satisfy her own curiosity and her professional responsibilities—not to help me. Whatever had caused her to dislike me from the very moment we met was still hovering between us.

I mentally kicked myself for not asking one of the other members of the camera crew to go along with me. I might still have to do that, I thought, even if it delayed my trip another day. But Brenda had the reputation of being the best the camera department had to offer. She was particularly known for getting great shots without revealing herself to her subjects. If Ovid was even half as dangerous as Chelsea had led me to believe, Brenda’s special talents might be the difference between getting out of Ovid with a story or not getting out at all.

Also, she was right—I did want to impress her. While I had accepted that we would certainly never be romantically involved, or even friends, I did crave her respect. In all the time I had known her, she had treated me as if I had nothing but my looks going for me, as if all of my talent was stuffed into my thick, dark hair and boyish smile. I was a newsman, damn it, no matter what she thought. I wasn’t going to spend the rest of my life anchoring the ten o’clock news in a secondary market. I was going to be someone whose name was on the lips of the most powerful figures in the country. All I needed to take that next step was a story too big to be ignored. I had a hunch—a newsman’s hunch—that Ovid was such a story.

When we pulled into the parking lot at the studio, Brenda sighed, “When do you want to go?”

“Go?”

“To this Ovid place,” she clarified.

I could scarcely believe what I was hearing. “You’ll go with me?”

She nodded. “Just give me some time to get some equipment. Then we’ll go see about transportation.”

I didn’t question her on her motives for agreeing to go. Deep down, I’ve always suspected the blank paper the nurse smugly showed us probably influenced her decision. She had to know what was going on, and she probably couldn’t stand for me to find out without her there to find out, too.

Whatever her motives, she threw herself into the mission with all her heart. We both had Sunday off and used the day to prepare for the mission with all the precision of a military operation. Also, we both called in to the station and took Monday off. I’m sure the fact that we both requested the time off within minutes of each other was going to be enough to set off the office wags, but it couldn’t be helped. Neither of us wanted to tell the real reason for the time off for fear of being scooped on the story.

We each worked from our own apartments, since Brenda seemed nervous about the idea of working out of mine and didn’t offer to let me work out of hers. I was starting to realize that she was very uncomfortable around men, but for what reason, I couldn’t say. Whatever the reason was, I was beginning to realize that while I might be a special target of hers, part of the reason she disliked me was my sex.

Anyhow, she did most of the organizing, leaving the research to me. We wanted to know as much as possible about where we were going, but the task proved to be daunting. Of course, there were no references anywhere relating to an Oklahoma town called Ovid. I really hadn’t expected to find any.

There were, however, several references to Vulman Industries, all

indicating that the company was headquartered in Tulsa. A quick check with a friend of mine at a Tulsa TV station confirmed that while the defense contractor had a Tulsa mailing address, it appeared to be nothing more than a mail drop.

Vulman was not a publicly-traded company, which meant that somehow, the company had found a way to finance itself without any outside stockholders. That was rather curious for what seemed to be a substantial defense contractor. I did, however, find a number of indications that the company was looking for talented engineers and scientists. No real address was given in any of the employment opportunities: there were just a phone number and a web address. I pulled up the web address, but there was just a short paragraph describing the company. One sentence did manage to catch my eye though:

“Vulman’s research facility is located in a small but growing community in the Southwest—a great place for raising a family with plenty of recreational and educational opportunities for the whole family.”

Nothing was said about exactly where the town was located, but I suspected the description was for Ovid.

Brenda and I talked back and forth all day. She had managed to snag a van from the station and enough miniaturized equipment to document our trip to Ovid without raising suspicions. “I’ve got the recorders in the van synched to my field gear,” she told me proudly. “Cell coverage is no problem. All our gear is tied to satellite. And once everything is recorded in the van, I can transmit it to the studios while we’re still in Ovid. I’ll be using a mini-cam,” she added.

Ah, the wonders of modern technology!

“That’s great, Brenda,” I remarked. Then I told her how I had managed to get information on a produce delivery that evening from the terminal where Chelsea had been found. I had hacked into the distributor’s system—a handy little talent I had picked up in my college days and still utilized on occasions such as this one. The destination listed on

the manifest was, of course, not Ovid. However, I suspected Ovid to be the destination when I saw the customer listed as 'Duggan's IGA' with no city listed. Besides, the main distributor for IGA stores made most of its deliveries out of Tulsa. I suspected the Oklahoma City distributor was being used to make its destination less likely to trace. Very clever those 'gods.'

Brenda agreed to pick me up later that evening. Then we'd park the van in some unobtrusive spot and hike over to the terminal, hitching a ride for Ovid. That settled, I spent some time packing a backpack complete with food, water and a couple of those space-age thin blankets. It would be very chilly in the produce truck. A shaving kit and some extra tapes for my recorder rounded out my kit. I spent the next few hours waiting anxiously for Brenda and thinking about how all the networks would be kissing my ass when I brought back this story.

Brenda wasn't going to give Jennifer Garner a run for her money on looks, but I had to admit she did look sort of sexy in something that resembled a conservative version of one of Garner's outfits. Her hair was hidden under a black knit cap, so the rather severe way she wore it was hidden from view. She wore a black leather jacket (as did I for that matter) and a pair of black leather pants that looked as if she had ridden in them on the seat of a motorcycle. Apparently, there was more to Brenda than what met the eye.

"This had better pan out," she grumbled as I closed the door behind me. "I just talked to Sam back at the studio. Wally heard I had checked out a van and wanted to know what the hell I needed it for if I was taking a day off."

Sam was just a weekend producer, but he jumped whenever Wally needed something. "So what did you tell him?"

She grinned mischievously. "I told him Wally would have to talk to you."

"Thanks a lot." If we didn't come back with a ripe story, Wally would chew my ass into next Thursday. Well, it wouldn't be the first time.

In spite of all the security instituted in the last few years, it's still pretty

easy to sneak into places like truck terminals. As the largest terrorist incident to hit Oklahoma had shown a few years back, you didn't have to hijack a truck to cause damage—you could just rent one on your credit card. Oh sure, there was a chain link fence and a guard shack, but the gate was left open for the benefit of the trucks which shuffled in and out of the terminal. As for the guard—whatever he was reading seemed a lot more interesting to him than looking around to see two figures in black sneaking low and fast into the yard.

“Which truck is it?” Brenda asked when we had settled into a dark corner of the building only twenty yards or so from the closest truck.

I looked down at my printout. It was hard to read in the faint light spilling over from the loading dock but I managed. I pointed at the second nearest truck which was backed up to the dock. “It's that one over there. Come on!”

Without waiting for her to respond, I made my way to the back of the truck, pulling myself up from the side of the ramp. Brenda was right behind me and I managed to pull her up before anyone had spotted us. We hurried into the back of the truck and found a hiding spot back behind several palletized cases of lettuce. There was just enough room for the two of us to stretch out on the bed of the truck.

“What if this stuff shifts around?” Brenda asked nervously.

“Not likely,” I told her, nodding in the dim light to the tie-downs which held everything firmly in place.

Then we had to stay quiet as more produce was loaded into the trailer. At last the loading was complete and the doors swung shut leaving us in complete darkness. Brenda switched on a small light as the door clanged shut.

“What's that for?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “No one can see it from outside. I just feel better with a light on.”

“Afraid of the dark?”

“It isn't the dark I'm afraid of.”

The truck lurched forward, causing me to lose my balance. I rolled right into Brenda.

“Hey!” She pushed me away at once. In the dim light, I saw something in her eyes. I expected disdain but instead there was something else in her eyes. Could it be fright?

I pushed away from her, feeling something hard in her pocket. “That feels like a...”

“Just stay away from me, okay?” Her voice quaked with panic.

“Look, it was an accident.”

“I know that!” she snapped.

I sighed. “Look, Brenda, we’re going to be working together for a little while. I need to know what it is about me that is causing a problem. I don’t ask that you like me, but what is it about me that has you frightened enough to bring along a gun?”

“A... a gun?”

“Don’t be coy with me. I know a gun when I feel one. You’ve got a gun in your coat pocket. And don’t tell me you brought it along to challenge the gods.”

Her eyes were downcast. “Okay, Ash. I guess I should level with you. I don’t like men.”

“You’re a lesbian?” The question came out without thinking. Dan had told me she wasn’t a lesbian, but what she had just said seemed to contradict that.

“That isn’t what I said,” she told me. “I mean I don’t like men, but that doesn’t mean I do like women sexually.”

“You don’t like men because of a specific man,” I prompted. “A boyfriend?”

“Hardly!” she snorted. “He... he was an anchorman—like you. In fact, he looked a lot like you. It was back in Little Rock...”

I felt suddenly uncomfortable as I watched her tremble at an

unpleasant memory. "Look, Brenda, you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to."

"I do need to tell you," she insisted. "You're right. We need to be able to work together. As much as I hate to admit it, you may have stumbled on a big story here. I don't know that I buy into the idea of Greek gods any more than you do, but something is going on and whatever it is, it could be dangerous. We need to be able to depend on each other. Besides, you're nothing like Roger Allen anyway."

"Who's Roger Allen?"

"He was the anchorman I mentioned. He was..." Her voice trailed off. I waited in silence for her to compose herself. "He was the man who... who... raped me."

Brenda was crying softly now, and I felt like a heel. I hadn't known. Some newsman I was: I hadn't even suspected. "Brenda, I'm sorry..."

"It's not your fault," she sniffled. "I know that. I've always known that. It just that you're so much like him."

"You think I act like a rapist?"

"Of course not! That isn't what I mean. It's just that you have... well, a pretty high opinion of yourself. I guess that goes with your job. Most anchors I've known act as if a girl should just fall in bed with them because they're so wonderful."

"Maybe so," I allowed, "but I don't think there are many of us who would force the issue."

"I'm afraid I don't share your high opinion of your profession," she told me. "I almost didn't come with you today because I was afraid you'd try something, too."

Actually, I had fantasized about it a little in the time I had known her. Brenda was a decent-looking woman and I never turned down an opportunity. However, since she had always made it clear to me that she had absolutely no interest, I had shied away. I managed to get plenty of time in the sack with attractive and very willing women. I wasn't the sort of man who would see Brenda as a challenge that had

to be conquered, but from the way she talked she must have met a number of men who did think that way.

“So now that you’ve decided I’m not about to attack you, do you suppose we could be friends?” I asked her.

She looked me in the eye to make sure I wasn’t joking. “I... I think I’d like that.”

“I’m curious, though. If you were concerned that I might molest you, what made you decide to go along?”

“Well, I couldn’t miss out on a big story, could I?”

It was a glib answer, but a look into her eyes convinced me that it wasn’t the whole truth. I decided not to press further, though.

Whatever the rest of the truth was, I knew I wouldn’t be able to force it out of her.

We talked for a few more minutes about inconsequential things—our college days, hobbies, where we were from. It was the usual light conversation people indulge in when they first meet at a cocktail party. I suppose that was an apt analogy since in some ways, we were like a couple just meeting for the first time. Just as she had changed her opinion about me, I realized I had begun to change my opinion about her. Instead of a cast-iron bitch with lesbian tendencies, I learned she was really a friendly if vulnerable woman who under other circumstances would have been my friend much sooner. I began to see why Dan and some of the others around the station liked her. I was beginning to like her myself.

We finally decided to shut down the light and try to get a little sleep. Once we reached this strange town of Ovid, there would be no rest for us. Our mission would be to get as much information about the town as we could and get back out before whatever powers ran Ovid discovered our presence. A few hours’ sleep and we’d be ready for anything. At least that’s what we thought.

Of course, we were very, very wrong...

We were awakened when the truck braked to a stop, causing us to roll

into each other. We didn't even have a moment to look embarrassed as the back door of the trailer swung open. We both scrambled into the darkness behind the pallets, hoping the noise from the forklift would be loud enough to cover us.

As soon as the driver and the forklift operator were both busy handling the first pallet, we made our way out of the truck and scrambled away from the loading dock.

In the pre-dawn light, it was difficult to see anything unusual. We appeared to be in the parking lot of a smallish but modern supermarket. The words 'Duggan's IGA' shone in bright red neon as a few sleepy shoppers ambled into the brightly-lit entranceway of the store.

"Well, the girl's story checks out so far," Brenda commented, nodding at the neon sign.

"Yeah," I agreed. Actually, though, I was a little disappointed. Everything looked so mundane. Beyond the supermarket was a divided four-lane road with sparse early morning traffic shuffling past. There were other buildings dotting the roadway—gas stations, fast food outlets, and other retail businesses all just opening to catch the morning customers. There was nothing to suggest that there was anything unusual about this town.

"So where to now?" Brenda asked.

I nodded toward the road. "Most of the traffic is heading that way. My guess is that it's heading for the main part of town. Let's find out."

"Can't we just call a cab?" she muttered.

"The fewer people who know we're here the better," I told her. "Come on: it can't be far."

Actually, it wasn't too far—maybe a little over a mile. The sun was up as we found ourselves on what had to be the main drag.

"Main Street," Brenda read one of the street signs. "You'd think gods would be more original in their street names."

“So you were expecting Caesar Avenue or Nero Road?” I asked with a smirk.

She just shrugged. “Well, that sounds better than Main Street.”

I knew what she was thinking because I was thinking the same thing. We had both expected to find Ovid darkly mysterious. Instead, it looked like an updated version of Pleasantville. About the only thing which seemed to make it stand out was the fact that it looked unusually prosperous for a small town far from any big city. I was just starting to think we might have made a big mistake coming to Ovid when I saw something which changed my mind.

Three men got out of a parked car about half a block in front of us. All looked like typical small town businessmen just starting their day, except for one important thing: one of the men appeared to be somewhat transparent. At first, I thought it was a trick of the morning light, or perhaps it was just that I had gotten little rest the night before. Brenda disabused me of that notion, though.

“Do you see that?” she whispered while poking me in the arm. “You can see right through that guy.”

“I see it,” I replied. “Chelsea was right.”

“Chelsea?”

“Yeah. That’s what she called a shade: remember?”

“Oh right. She said they were a stand in. What did she mean by that?” Brenda asked.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “But I’ve got a hunch. What if shades exist only until there’s a real person to take their place? That could be why once a person is transformed, everybody remembers that they were always residents of Ovid.”

We watched discretely as the men entered a small café—the kind that serves twice-boiled coffee and greasy eggs but has guys lined up to eat it. With a quick nod to each other, we followed them in.

The place was called Duke’s, and in spite of its appearance, the

smells coming out of the kitchen weren't the odors of week-old grease. The food smelled great. Brenda and I slipped into a booth and each pulled a menu out of the holder, realizing suddenly how long it had been since we had eaten.

The waitress looked like an escapee from *Alice*, complete with a pastel pink dress and white apron. Like the businessmen we had followed, she was transparent, giving us an opportunity to observe a shade closely. I realized that you couldn't exactly see through her; instead it was as if you could sense what was directly behind her, sort of like looking at a double exposure.

We talked very little while waiting for our food, taking the time to observe our fellow patrons, both real and shade. If it weren't for the shades, I would have thought we were in your average small-town café. Men sat at the counter, reading the morning *Tulsa World* or talking about who would win the World Series. Waitresses hustled back and forth, filling coffee cups and carrying plates of steaming food. No one seemed concerned about being trapped in Ovid as Chelsea was. No one seemed worried that the person next to them was a little on the ghostly side. In fact, the whole scene was made weirder by its lack of concern.

"Here you go!" the waitress announced, placing a succulent cheese omelet in front of me and a slice of cantaloupe and dry wheat toast in front of Brenda. After she had refilled our coffee cups and departed, I dived into the omelet.

"Oh my god!" I sighed. "Brenda, you have to try this."

She shook her head. "No thanks."

"But it's great!"

"Yeah, and there are enough calories in there to put a pound on my hips," she retorted. "You men don't know how lucky you are. I have to watch what I eat all the time or I'll get fat."

I shook my head. Well, all the more for me.

Brenda leaned on the table so she could not be overheard. "So where

do we start? Do we confront our diaphanous friends over there?”

“I think not,” I told her, washing down another delicious bite with one of the best cups of coffee I had ever tasted. “Look around. Half the people in this place are the same way. And no one else seems to see anything strange. I doubt if any of the shades even know what they are.”

“Maybe they’re aliens,” Brenda suggested. “I saw this movie once with that wrestler—Rodney Piper. There were a bunch of aliens walking around but everybody thought they were human.”

It was a thought, I admitted to myself. But deep down, I was convinced some strange hallucinogenic drug was behind Ovid. And I had a pretty good idea where I’d find that drug. “The first thing we need to do is to get into Vulman Industries,” I decided.

“But if it’s a defense industry, how are we going to get in their facility?”

I smiled. “Very simple. We tell the truth—sort of.”

Half an hour later after a short cab ride we were in the lobby of Vulman Industries. A nervous-looking receptionist eyed us from the safety of her desk while Brenda and I perused the photos of zooming Fords and soaring aircraft. We were waiting for a Holly Cache who apparently was in charge of Public Relations for Vulman. Maybe we’d get something useful from her, or maybe we’d just get the bum’s rush. Whatever our reception would be, I was sure I could get something to use in our story.

Of course, we hadn’t told the receptionist who we really were. We had told her we were from the Oklahoma Industrial Directory and were just verifying information about the company. I don’t think she really believed us, but that didn’t really matter.

“Mr. Stafford?” a voice came from behind me. I almost didn’t react to the phony name I’d given the receptionist. I wasn’t used to doing that. Too many people in Oklahoma City would have recognized me, but we were in a region served by Tulsa stations now, so I decided on a

fake identity.

I turned, smiling as I extended my hand. “Yes, Ted Stafford, Oklahoma Industrial Directory. And this is my assistant, Miss Henshaw.”

Brenda hid her scowl well. I had introduced her to the receptionist as Hermione Henshaw.

No matter what else happened, it was going to be a pleasure talking with Holly Cache. She was young, attractive and just dark enough with her coal black hair to confirm an American Indian heritage. If all the Indians had looked like her, the white men wouldn’t have had a chance a couple of centuries ago.

She escorted us to a comfortable conference room, offering us the obligatory coffee along the way. We both declined. I couldn’t speak for Brenda, but I had enjoyed enough excellent coffee that morning to be wired for a week.

“Mr. Vulman will be joining us shortly,” Holly told us once we were seated.

“Mr. Vulman?” Brenda blurted out.

Holly nodded. “Yes. Eric Vulman. He’s our president.”

Oh, this was getting better and better, I thought. The receptionist must have made him think Mike Wallace was in the lobby with the *60 Minutes* investigative team. If the prez himself was going to join us, it meant Vulman Industries might well be behind the weird occurrences in Ovid.

We didn’t have to wait long—another sign of a disturbance in the force. Holly left the minute her boss appeared. Eric Vulman was an imposing man, probably on the north side of forty. He was well muscled as if he worked out regularly. His only apparent flaw was a pronounced limp when he walked. Too bad, I thought. Given the rest of his development, he could have participated in the Iron Man competition without the gimpy leg.

“Mr. Stafford!” he greeted me in a strong, confident voice, extending

his hand. "I'm Eric Vulman."

I took his hand, noting his firm handshake. "Ted Stafford."

"Should I call you Ted?" he asked, still holding my hand. Then his eyes narrowed. "Or would you rather I call you Ash?"

"How did you know?" was all I could manage as he released my hand.

"I didn't until just now," he admitted. I thought he meant I had tripped myself up, but he added, "I mean by shaking your hand, I learned everything about you I needed to know."

You know, sometimes the seeming-impossible explanation is the right one. As a newsman, I had always been taught to look beyond the obvious, and in a world of hidden agendas and secret plots, who could blame me for rejecting the fantastic explanation in favor of the more rational one? No human being had the ability to learn about a person just by shaking his hand. Of course, Eric Vulman might have been teasing me, but a look in those steely eyes of his told me he was guileless. Besides, I remembered enough mythology to recall a crippled god named Vulcan. Could it be that there really were gods?

"I know who you are, too," I told him with a bit more bravado than my churning stomach would have supported. It was a long shot, for I still wasn't convinced he was a god, but perhaps that was the story put out for general consumption, so it wouldn't hurt to play along.

"Do you now?"

I nodded. "And I know what you're doing here—you and the other gods," I told him. Of course there was an implied bluff in my statement. I knew from Chelsea's story what they were doing but not why.

"That won't do you any good," he countered, sitting in one of the comfortable conference chairs and motioning for all of us to do the same.

I decided not to ask the obvious: how did he intend to stop me? That smacked too much of bad movie dialog. Instead I asked, "Why all the

secrecy? Why are you doing this? And are you really gods?"

He smiled as a parent might smile when a child of his performs a cute trick. "Three questions. That's an interesting technique. All right. I'll answer the last one first: yes, I suppose we are gods. Why are we doing it? Well, let's just say we have good reasons—reasons which could affect the survival of everyone on this planet. As for the secrecy, I can only say for our plan to work, no one in the human realm must know of its very existence."

He might be an ancient god, but he knew how to be evasive with a reporter, I thought. He had made it sound as if he had answered my questions but had, in fact, given me little or nothing. Maybe somebody from the *Athens Daily Blab* had interviewed him a couple of thousand years ago. "The public has a right to know what's going on here."

He sighed, "Really Mr. Wells, I would have thought you would be able to come up with something more original than that. The public has absolutely no more right to know what we're doing here than they have a right to know what you had for breakfast at Duke's this morning."

"So you've been watching us," I said.

"No." There was that smile again. "As I told you, I was able to learn quite a bit about you merely by shaking your hand. I know about your past, your present and..."

"My future?"

"Some of it," he allowed.

"So what about my future?" I asked, genuinely worried he really did know it.

"I know you'll die soon."

"Is that a threat?" Brenda asked. Good for her, I thought. I knew from the bulge in her coat pocket that she had a mini-recorder working away in there.

"Not at all," Vulman said smoothly. "I'm merely stating a fact. You've

been expected.”

As if on cue, the door opened. A tall, slim man in a police uniform entered the room. His eyes were hidden by mirrored glasses, but I could tell he was staring right at me.

“Officer Mercer, I presume,” I nodded at him.

The police officer was silent, but Eric Vulman chuckled, “I see you were very well briefed by Ms. Bridgewater.”

I probably should have played dumb, I realized. I remembered one of my journalism professors once telling me that it’s best to not let the person you’re interviewing know how much you know. It makes them too cautious. Now both Eric Vulman and this Officer Mercer knew I had talked to Chelsea Bridgewater. Of course, they probably had a pretty good idea that I had interviewed her already, but I had just confirmed it and gotten nothing in return.

“The Judge is expecting you,” Officer Mercer told us. He was so matter-of-fact about it that I wondered for a moment if anyone had ever resisted him. I was tempted to try. While I hadn’t exactly bought into the idea that this Judge could really change people into someone else, I had come to the conclusion that he was a man to be avoided. If I could have gotten everything I needed without seeing him, I would have been happy. Now, though, the best course of action was probably to see him and confront him.

Brenda had other ideas, though. “We haven’t done anything wrong,” she argued.

I almost thought I could sense an eyebrow rising behind those mirrored glasses. “Oh? I was under the impression that you had trespassed on private property and stowed away on a truck engaged in interstate commerce.”

“So turn us over to the Interstate Commerce Commission,” Brenda shot back. I had to admire her attitude. I was starting actually to like her.

“Please come with me,” Officer Mercer said calmly. I began to wonder

once again just what he'd do if we refused to go with him.

"No way," Brenda growled. Well, I was about to find out what he'd do.

Without another word being spoken, Brenda suddenly jerked out of her chair, almost as if she were a puppet on strings. Without a word, she walked toward the door unsteadily, as if she were fighting some unseen force. The look in her eyes was one of pure panic. Neither Eric Vulman nor Officer Mercer acted as if anything was unusual.

Looking back on it, I think it was at that moment that I began to realize that everything Chelsea had told me was probably true. While I had been leaning toward the likelihood that Ovid was suffering under some mass delusion fomented by some secret government or corporate project, I suddenly realized I had been deluded by my own journalistic prejudices.

Like all good journalists, I had come to believe that businesses and governments always had something to hide. If Brenda and I had discovered that Vulman Industries had been developing some hallucinogenic/hypnotic drug in a company town called Ovid, neither of us would have been too surprised. Additionally, had we found the government through the CIA or some black agency had been financing the bizarre test, we would have been even less surprised.

But no drug I could imagine would cause a strong-willed woman like Brenda to obey some unspoken command and follow Officer Mercer against her will. It was suddenly dawning on me that whatever was going on in Ovid had nothing to do with any agency of business or government. Were these apparent men really gods? I wasn't sure I was willing to go that far just yet, but I was starting to believe there was a distinct possibility that neither of them was human.

"Are you coming, Mr. Wells?" Officer Mercer asked calmly as Brenda shuffled out the door against her will.

I shrugged, trying to look braver than I felt. Without further urging, I stood up and followed Brenda out the door.

"What the hell happened to me?" Brenda asked when we were both

secured in the back seat of Officer Mercer's police car.

"You tell me," I replied softly as Officer Mercer slid into the driver's seat.

"I don't know," she told me, her voice shaking. "I just couldn't help myself. It was as if I had no control over my body anymore."

Her face brightened. "Wait a minute. I still have my gun." She reached in her pocket and her smile became a frown. "Where did it go? It must have dropped out of my pocket."

Yeah, like Cal's knife, I thought to myself, but I didn't say anything.

What the hell had I gotten us into? I asked myself. Towns that aren't on the map could be explained—Los Alamos during the Second World War, for example, but that was for defense reasons. There was a war going on. Little girls who thought they had once been burly bikers could easily be the products of drugs, hypnosis, or mental illness. Even transparent people could be a hallucination. But put them all together, stir well, and add a dash of telekinetic control over another person and the situation became much more incredible than I could ever have imagined.

To make matters worse, I was suddenly starting to believe that whatever the beings who controlled Ovid were, they might really have the power to change Brenda and me into other people—residents of Ovid who were as much prisoners as the inmates of any prison.

I wished futilely that I had never gotten caught up with Chelsea Bridgewater. At that moment, I would have given just about anything to be back at KFOR-TV plodding along while mumbling that I deserved a big break. Now Brenda and I were about to come face to face with a power that I couldn't even have imagined a few days earlier. I found myself wishing I had never gotten Brenda involved in this. She was proving to be a good partner on this self-imposed assignment and now she would be forced to share my fate at the hands of the ominous judge.

So what would this judge do to me? Would he make me into a young

girl as he had Chelsea? Or maybe he could change us into things that would make being a young girl seem like a slap on the wrist. I think for the first time in my life, I felt genuine fear. I began to envy Chelsea and her friends. At least when they were taken to court, they had reason to believe they would simply be fined and released. Brenda and I knew what was at stake.

Strangely enough, though, Brenda seemed pretty calm once she got over the shock of being forced into cooperating. By the time we arrived at City Hall and began our walk to the courtroom, she was her usual unperturbed self, looking about as if she were deciding what to take a picture of.

“Aren’t you worried?” I asked her under my breath.

To my surprise, she smiled. “Why should I be? So what if I get a new life? This one hasn’t been all that great.”

That actually shocked me. I had always thought Brenda was angry at me, but after her admission I realized she was actually angry at men (of which I was one at least for the moment) and upset with the curves life had thrown her. I was starting to realize that she had never been able to recover fully from her sexual attack. Instead of seeking help and trying to overcome it, she had tried to cure herself. To her, the solution appeared obvious: be less attractive—both physically and socially—to avoid men.

I actually felt a little like a heel as we walked into the courtroom. True, there was no call for Brenda to act the way she did with me, but I had done everything in my power to confirm her attitude toward me. I had played the big cheese anchorman and hit on her when we first met. I had been an asshole: there were no two ways about it. It was a fine time to realize it. In a few minutes, we might both be other people with no recollection of who we had been before.

There were only two other people in the courtroom when we were ushered in by Officer Mercer. One was a sweet-looking blonde who sat in the gallery, dressed in a sexy but still somehow professional outfit. She made eye contact with me, and it felt for a moment as if she

was making deeper contact than that. The other person was an equally attractive brunette who was seated at one of the tables at the front of the courtroom. Her hair professionally upswept and her attractive gray suit had lawyer written all over them. I had covered enough trials to realize she sat at the defendant's table.

"Hello," she said, rising and offering a slim hand. "I'm Susan Jager, your attorney."

I shook her hand. "And are you going to see that we get the same sentence as Chelsea Bridgewater?" I asked more coldly than I had intended.

She dropped her hand in surprise. "You know what goes on here?"

"I know some of it," I allowed. "What I don't know is why. Do you?"

She shook her head, looking around to make sure Officer Mercer was far enough away to miss our whispered conversation. "None of us know. No matter what happens, Mr. Wells, don't ask that question when The Judge is on the bench."

"Why not?"

"You don't want to make him angry," she explained. "If you just keep your mouth shut and act reasonably contrite, I can probably get him to go easy on you."

"You mean we might be high school cheerleaders instead of young Girl Scouts?"

"You may think it's funny, Mr. Wells..." Actually, I didn't think it was funny at all, but the reporter in me demanded the confrontation. "...but you're facing powers you can't even imagine. A good number of the dogs and cats running around Ovid started their lives by annoying The Judge. How would you like to be a cocker spaniel for the rest of your life?"

I had to admit to myself that it was sobering advice. It was one thing to be changed into a Girl Scout. It was quite another to find myself a likely customer for flea and tick powder. I nodded, abashed.

“All right then,” she acknowledged. “Now, tell me whatever possessed you to try to get into Ovid.”

“The public has a right to know what’s going on here in Ovid,” I said pontifically. It was a bad mistake. Even Brenda groaned at that old line. When was I going to learn?

Susan Jager was even more critical. “I certainly hope you don’t try to use that as a defense with The Judge, Mr. Wells,” she admonished me. “If you do, you may even end up as something being chased by the dogs and the cats.”

That didn’t sound good at all. “All right. I’ll come clean. I thought this whole Ovid thing was some sort of government plot.” I went on to explain the theories I had shared with Brenda. Susan’s face became less stern, finally breaking out into a smile.

“What’s so entertaining?” I finally asked her.

“I’m just amused at your conclusions,” she told us. “I’ve often wondered what would happen if someone got out to tell our story. We did have a case some time ago of a message that got out in an email, but that got us a visitor for another reason. You really thought you were up against the government and thought you could waltz into town and waltz back out again with no one noticing.”

“Well, we managed for a while,” Brenda pointed out.

“Are you kidding?” Susan laughed. “The g... the people who run Ovid aren’t stupid, you know. Sure, there are holes in their security, but once those holes are discovered, they’re closed quickly. I got a call early this morning to clear my schedule for your trial. The Judge knew the minute you got into town. I think they’ve been watching every service and delivery vehicle coming into Ovid since Chelsea’s incident. Didn’t you realize once they figured out how Chelsea got out of town, they’d make sure no one else got out that way?”

Actually, I hadn’t thought about it. I was certainly thinking about it now, though. How could I have been so stupid? The answer was obvious: I smelled the big story—the one that was going to give me a career in

network news. Now, my next television appearance might well be on Animal Planet.

“What happened to Chelsea?” Brenda asked, making me feel even more foolish. I hadn’t bothered to ask that question of a person who was likely to know the answer. Somewhere along the line that morning, I had stopped being a reporter and become just one more poor schmuck trying to figure out how to beat a court sentence.

“She’s okay,” Susan replied, “but she’s now a six year old girl. By the time she’s old enough to try to pull a stunt like she did again, she’ll be reluctant to try it.”

“Why? Was she brainwashed?” I asked, finally remembering to be a reporter.

Susan shook her head. “No, nothing quite like that. It’s just that Ovid has a way of growing on people after a while. Life here becomes normal—even enjoyable for most of us. By the time Chelsea gets back to the age she was first transformed to be, she’ll probably be happy being a girl.”

“That sound like brainwashing to me,” Brenda grumbled.

Susan started to say something but was interrupted as Officer Mercer intoned, “All rise! Municipal Court for the City of Ovid is now in session, the Honorable Judge presiding.”

Chelsea had never bothered to describe this judge, but I still had an odd feeling of déjà vu as the god, assuming that was what he was, strode into the room. He looked like a typical magistrate, with a slightly graying beard and well-trimmed, mostly brown hair. He wore glasses that looked expensive, with their gold frames and small lenses. His black robe was crisply pressed, and he looked as if he was ready to pose for the group picture of the US Supreme Court. I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised, but I guess it would have been a little out of place for him to enter the courtroom in a toga carrying a lightning bolt.

“What’s our first case, Officer Mercer?” he asked, but the expression

on his face told me he already knew all about Brenda and me.

“The People of Ovid versus Ashton Wells and Brenda Altman, Your Honor.”

In a few minutes, Brenda and I would be different people unless I did something to stop him. It was a terrible risk, but we didn’t have any choice. Before our attorney could stop me, I rose to my feet. “Your Honor!”

The Judge (for his regal presence seemed to demand the capital letters) scowled at me. “You have an attorney, Mr. Wells. You would be wise to listen to her and follow proper court procedure.”

I doubted if the American Southwest had seen less proper court procedure since Judge Roy Bean had tried his last case, but I was prudent enough at least not to say so. “Your Honor, I realize we violated the law when we stowed away on that truck...”

“Then there would seem to be nothing left to do but sentence you.”

“...but, Your Honor, we represent the media. If we have intruded on something we shouldn’t have, I apologize, but please consider we were only trying to do our jobs as best we could. We’ve done nothing wrong.”

The Judge actually chuckled at that. “Well, at least you didn’t give me that nonsense about the public having a right to know.”

“Would you at least consider freeing us to do our jobs?” I pressed.

“We would be willing to forget about our story here in Ovid if you’d dismiss the charges against us.”

His eyes seemed to bore through me, but I got the feeling he was at least undecided as to what to do with us. “If I let you go,” he began ominously, “you might not like the results.”

My heart sank.

“However,” he went on, “I may be able to reach something of a compromise with you that will allow you to continue your media careers...”

I know: I was a fool—but I couldn't help it. I actually thought for a moment I had persuaded him. I looked back at our attorney, but the triumphant look on my face faded as I saw her sadly shake her head. The Judge looked at her and asked, "Do you have anything else to say, Ms. Jager?"

She rose to her feet. "Your Honor, it would appear that Mr. Wells has chosen to represent himself..." Brenda tugged on her sleeve and whispered something to her. Her face brightened a little. "However, Ms. Altman has requested that I still represent her. In that capacity, Your Honor, I would like to point out that my client could be considered an innocent dupe, unaware of the seriousness of Mr. Wells' schemes."

"Now wait a min..." I started to say, but a gesture from The Judge silenced me—literally. I found I could no longer speak.

"Ms. Jager," The Judge began, "if ever a pair has come to Ovid knowing full well what the potential consequences might be, it is this one." He then turned his gaze to alternate between Brenda and me. "You may not have believed everything you heard about us, but you believed enough to know you were meddling in affairs far beyond your reckoning. As a result, the consequences shall not be mitigated and your sentences will be unusually appropriate. You see, I can look inside your very souls and see what it is that you most deeply desire. You, Ms. Altman, want surcease from the shame you feel resulting in your unfortunate sexual assault. That I will grant you but hardly in the way you may have anticipated."

He turned to me, his face becoming even sterner. "As for you, Mr. Wells, validation as a reporter. While your obvious goal of wishing to be associated with one of the networks is beyond this court's ability to grant, I can at least see that your desired validation is within reach."

He settled back into his chair and began to chant in another language. It sounded like Latin, but I wasn't sure. I certainly knew from Chelsea's description what was about to happen, though. I braced as best I could for what was about to occur. How many others had ever known as Brenda and I did that they were about to be changed into other

people—or worse. Would I remain human? I was sure I would. How could I be validated as a reporter and not be human?

Brenda had no such assurances. I managed to turn my head, although doing so felt as if it were happening in slow motion. I watched as Brenda's form began to shimmer and lose its shape, almost like one of those computer morphing program images. She was becoming larger, bulkier, and her already-short hair seemed to be pulling back into her head, changing to a sandy brown as it did.

While I watched Brenda change, I began to be aware of changes in my own body as well. The sensation was closest to being tickled, as if hundreds of feathers were gliding over the surface of my skin. Strangely, I felt no fear. Perhaps that was part of the magic. Neither was I terribly confused as most of The Judge's victims must have been. After all, I knew what was being done to me.

The tickling let up some but remained over my ears and down my neck. My hair had obviously become far longer. It seemed as if The Judge had a one-track mind when it came to changing people's sex. I was going to miss Little Ash, I thought wistfully. As if in reply, the space between my legs seemed suddenly empty. I looked down in time to see that I was now wearing a white shirt—or blouse to use the terminology of my developing sex. Two bumps were rising from the blouse. Then the bumps became hills and the hills became... Christ Almighty!

I tried to tell myself that my new breasts were not really as big as they seemed. I was probably right, but having never had them before, they seemed absolutely immense, especially from the angle I now viewed them from.

Other changes were happening as well, but the sensations came from so many different parts of my body at once that it seemed impossible to note them all. I began to feel smaller and weaker—unfortunate traits of the sex that had been chosen for me. Then suddenly, I felt a little taller again, but I realized to my dismay that it was due to finding myself perched on what were undoubtedly high heels. It seemed that The Judge was going all out to make my transformation an unpleasant

one. If I had known just how unpleasant a change he had in mind for me, I would have probably screamed in my new feminine voice.

Even knowing what had happened to me, I felt disoriented and helpless. I knew in the intellectual part of my mind that I now stood before the court as a woman, but what woman? Who had The Judge decided I was to be? He had told me that my change would be “unusually appropriate.” Just what had he meant by that?

Whatever I looked like, Brenda already knew. She... no—now ‘he’ looked at me with just the faintest trace of a grin. His own change had been drastic. Brenda was now a man several inches taller than I, but just how tall I couldn’t tell since I had obviously lost some of my height. He appeared to be in his twenties with sandy brown hair, neatly trimmed as was his beard. Yes, that’s right: Brenda now had a beard. He touched it tentatively and seemed to find it appropriate. I had never been one to judge another man’s appearance, but I had to admit he appeared a good-looking guy. He was dressed in wash khaki pants and a tasteful sports shirt, looking as if he was ready to play a round of golf with the boys. God, how I envied him!

“Josh, Jennifer,” The Judge began. We turned since it was obvious he was speaking to us. “You both have the story I’ve given you. You should go back to your office and touch up the pictures, Josh. As for you, Jennifer, you have a story to turn in. Good day!”

Before we could speak, he rose from the bench and retired to his chambers, leaving the two of us dumbstruck before the bench.

“What just happened?” Brenda asked in her new baritone. She seemed surprised by it, clearing her—oops, his new voice.

“I... I don’t know,” I replied. I was not relieved to find my new voice. While it sounded all right to me, I knew from years of broadcasting that it would sound differently to others. I was certain it was high and lilting—too high to be a good broadcasting voice.

“These are yours: they should help,” Susan called out, pointing at two bags sitting on the defendant’s table. One was a camera bag which Brenda grabbed at once.

The other was a purse.

With trepidation, I picked up the purse, noticing for the first time that my nails were longer and painted dark red. I wondered if I'd be able to root around in that purse without breaking one of them. Not that I minded breaking a nail. I planned to have them cleaned off and cut short as soon as possible.

"It seems I'm Josh Garfield," Brenda announced, looking at a business card from the camera case. "I own a photo studio here in town. And apparently I do freelance work for the local newspaper." He flashed a press pass with an unexpected grin. The bag seemed to brighten his spirits. He was still a photographer. Had we both retained our old professions?

Nervously, I pulled a small, feminine wallet from the depths of the purse. The first thing I pulled out was an official-looking press pass. It identified me as a Jennifer Olson. The name sounded strangely familiar for some reason. Then I saw my driver's license. "Oh no..." I moaned, looking at the picture.

I bolted for the door, searching quickly for the restroom—the women's restroom, of course. I knew I was now a woman. I had expected as much the moment I was taken to The Judge's courtroom. The problem was the woman I had become, as evidenced by my driver's license. Oh, I knew pictures on licenses were notoriously poor, but I had seen enough in the picture to realize something was drastically wrong.

I didn't even have time to think about the odd sensations of swaying hips or bobbing breasts. The click of my heels on the tile of the restroom floor didn't even bother me, nor did I wonder at the time how I could so easily walk in high heels while constrained in a tight skirt. I had only one thing on my mind—I had to see my face.

The reflection in the mirror confirmed my worst suspicions. I was attractive in a country girl sort of way, but it was the wrong sort of attractive. You see I had grown up as a man with 'The Look.' To be successful as a television anchor, you had to have 'The Look.' It was hard to put your finger on just what that was. It was possible for a

handsome man or an attractive woman to look good on the street but lack the appearance required by the camera. While television cameras had improved over the years, they still tended to exaggerate certain features, causing ears to look too big or necks to appear too fat.

While I didn't look too big or too fat, I no longer had 'The Look.'

I was a redhead now, with long straight hair the color of flame—hair far too red for the camera to like. I had freckles, and not just a slight dusting on the nose and cheeks. I had freckles in profusion—the sort of freckles that seemed to demand I have my hair in pigtails and be dressed in denim. Did I mention that the camera hates freckles? I would have to wear enough makeup to look like Elizabeth I to hide those 'cute' little freckles from the camera.

And that was just the beginning. My nose was too narrow and my eyes a little too close together. Those features wouldn't have kept me out of a Girls of Oklahoma section in *Playboy*, but they were enough to make a television camera loathe me. Also, I had significantly large breasts. I could see them through the white knit blouse I wore. A television camera would blow them up until I looked like Dolly Parton's younger sister. At least my ears didn't stick out, but that wouldn't be enough to make me look right on camera.

"Oh no..." I muttered again, noticing the coup de grace for my television career: I had an accent—a big fat Southern accent that you could cut with a knife. I not only looked like a country girl: I sounded like one as well.

I felt tears welling up in my eyes. I had acknowledged the possibility that Chelsea had been telling me the truth about Ovid. I had even realized that there was a chance I might be discovered and dragged before The Judge. I had known that there was a strong possibility I might end up in skirts and heels. I even had imagined that if that happened, I'd be lauded when I broke the story of Ovid like a war correspondent displaying his wounds. But I never dreamed for a moment that I'd be turned into someone who looked and sounded like one of the little cuties on *Hee-Haw*.

I was doomed.

I was sniffing, feeling very sorry for myself when the restroom door opened. “Jenny? Are you all right?” It was my attorney.

“No, I’m most certainly not all right!” I snapped in my disgusting feminine twang. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been angry at her. She was looking at me with what had to be genuine concern. But in my mind, she was part of the system that had transformed me, and in the absence of The Judge, she was a convenient target.

“You had to realize when you came here to Ovid that this was a possibility,” she pointed out, handing me a tissue.

I used it to dab at my eyes. This was just great. On top of everything else, I was crying. “I knew it was a possibility,” I admitted. “At least I knew it when I realized Chelsea had told me the truth. You said she’s a six-year-old girl now?”

“Yes, she had her age reduced a few years,” Susan confirmed, making it sound like a light sentence. “She’s six years old now and unlikely to try to run away again. The Judge told her if she tried it again, he’d put her in diapers.”

I shuddered. If I screwed up, that might happen to me now too, I realized.

“Look, it could have been worse,” Susan continued. “For you I mean. You’re a girl, but you’re young and attractive...”

“Yeah, but I don’t have ‘The Look’.”

“The what?”

In a trembling voice, I explained what I meant. To my surprise, she actually giggled. “Well, I don’t think you need to worry about that here. Ovid has a radio station but no TV station.”

“I don’t plan on staying here,” I argued, sniffing back another sob.

Susan shook her head. “Odds are good you’ll never leave Ovid, Jenny. You had to realize that, didn’t you?”

“There has to be a way,” I said defiantly. I had no intention of remaining a hick girl in a hick town for the rest of my life—or even for the rest of Jennifer Olson’s life.

“Some people are allowed to leave,” she admitted, “but not very many.”

“And they’re the trusted ones—like you?” I asked bitterly.

Susan had the good taste to blush. “Yes, my husband and I can leave. And yes, The Judge trusts us. But take my word for it: if you try, you can have a good life here in Ovid. That’s more than you would have had if you’d never come here.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, sniffing again.

Susan shrugged. “I suppose you wouldn’t know about that since Chelsea probably didn’t know. The only people The Judge changes are those who would have died within a few months anyway.”

“Died?”

She nodded. “Yes, according to The Judge, you and Brenda were slated to die next month in a helicopter accident while working together on a story.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It doesn’t matter if you believe me or not,” Susan said with just a little irritation. “The Judge showed me the newspaper story before you were brought into court. Oh yes, that’s right. He has ways of seeing the future—or at least some things in the future. You and Brenda died tragically—you were to be married in a couple of months.”

I actually laughed at that. “You can’t be serious. Brenda and I? That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard of. I don’t like her much and she doesn’t like me. What newspaper did he get that story from? *The National Enquirer*?”

“Well at least you’ll get another chance,” Susan sighed, not bothering to respond to my gibe. “You’re now engaged to Josh Garfield—the man Brenda was transformed into.”

I followed her gaze down to my left hand. Oh my God! I was wearing an engagement ring! “Shit!”

Well, one thing was absolutely certain: there was not about to be a wedding in my future. I shuddered at even the thought of being the blushing bride. And then there was the idea of the wedding night... No Fucking Way!

“Don’t reject the idea of marrying him,” Susan cautioned.

I looked at her, suddenly suspicious that she was one of the gods and reading my mind.

“And no, I’m not a mind reader,” she told me, raising my suspicions even higher. “You’re just wearing your thoughts on your face...”

And what a pretty face it was, I mentally added with no little sarcasm.

“You’ll find The Judge usually gets what he wants,” she went on, “and for some reason, he wants you to marry Josh.”

“Well this is one time he’s going to be disappointed.”

“Be careful, Jenny...”

“Stop calling me that!”

“Do you prefer Jennifer?”

“Are you feeble minded?” I retorted. “I prefer Ash–Ashton Wells. Look, you’re supposed to be my lawyer. Help me out: find out what it would take to get him to change his mind and change me back into a man.”

“I’ve only known him to offer it to one person,” she replied. “And she turned him down in the end.”

“What? Had she been some kind of a transvestite?” I growled. The sudden reddening of her face made me realize she had been speaking of herself. Well that’s just great, Ash. Why don’t you stick your pretty little foot into your sweet little mouth?

“Uh... look, if you could just ask,” I tried to recover.

“I’ll ask,” she said, her composure returning, “but don’t expect him to agree. Your best course of action is to be Jenny Olson, girl reporter for

the *Ovid Chronicle*, just like The Judge wants you to be. If he doesn't like the way you handle this change, I can guarantee you he won't change his mind."

"All right," I sighed. "I'll do my best."

As if I had a choice.

Susan smiled and patted my hand. "Good! I'll get back to you in a couple of days."

She left me alone with my thoughts. Something was bothering me—something about my new name...

Oh crap on a sharp stick! Jenny Olson, reporter—Jimmy Olson, reporter. Why that lousy son of a bitch! He wasn't happy with making me look like a little country girl: he had to give me a name and occupation that would turn my life into a lampoon.

I think if I could have had my meals brought into me, I would have stayed there in the restroom for the remainder of my life, but as much as I hated to do it, it was time for me to face the world. Jenny Olson, cub reporter, was about to make her entrance. Jeepers, Mr. Kent!

I suddenly realized as I started out the door that I had no idea where I was supposed to go or how I was going to get there. I knew I was a reporter, but what did that mean? According to my press pass, I worked for the *Ovid Chronicle*, just as Susan had told me, but for all I knew, that might be a once-a-week rag where I only worked a couple of days a week.

I fished around in my purse (purse!) looking for something that might help me. There I found some business cards with an address for the paper that meant nothing to me and a set of keys for a Mazda. Oh great. Not only was I now a girl but I would have to drive around in a crappy little Japanese car as well.

Brenda—Josh—had already left the building. I was not unhappy about that. The last thing I needed right now was to watch him chuckling from his new male perspective at my new sex.

"Can I help you?" a feminine voice called out behind me. I turned and

saw an attractive young black woman wearing a uniform similar to Officer Mercer's. I had to say though that she looked a lot better in it. I guess there was still plenty of male left in me at that point. I suspected she was the same officer Chelsea had mentioned. "I'm Wanda Hazleton by the way." I recognized her now as the police officer I had seen earlier when I was brought into the jail.

"Ash—Jennifer Olson," I corrected myself. "Yeah, maybe you can help me. Can you tell me where I could find this address?" I showed her my card.

"Ah! I thought you were new here," she grinned. "You were one of the ones Officer Mercer brought in this morning. Welcome to Ovid."

I grunted in response. I certainly didn't feel very welcome. I also noted to myself that she didn't ask if I had been the man or the woman who had been brought in that morning. She had probably already guessed that I had had my sex changed. It seemed to be the standard *modus operandi* for The Judge. I wondered for a moment if she, too, had once been a man.

"The Chronicle is a block west of Main Street and about four blocks south of here," she told me. "And be careful. Newcomers have a tendency to get involved in fender benders until they get used to their new cars and new bodies."

I could imagine. I suddenly realized I would be driving in heels. "I'll be careful."

She smiled at me again, and this time I actually managed to smile back.

I actually didn't have much trouble driving to the Chronicle. The Mazda turned out to be a little 323 (zoom, zoom and all that crap) which was peppier and easier to drive than I had imagined. And driving in heels wasn't half as difficult as I thought it might be. My biggest problem was feeling like a midget on the road. My new shorter body and smaller car combined to make me feel more like a squirrel darting down the road than another motorist. It seemed like every vehicle on the road with me was twice my size.

The Chronicle building was something of a pleasant surprise. I had been expecting a storefront operation, but it seemed Ovid's newspaper was as prosperous as the rest of the town. Raised metallic letters on a tasteful single floor brick-building front said simply 'The Chronicle.' With its mirrored glass windows and double aluminum doors framed by professional landscaping, the Chronicle Building would not have been out of place in an office park in Oklahoma City.

Inside, though, was another matter. The interior of the building was rather utilitarian, with a service type reception desk where someone (a transparent someone) was filling out what appeared to be a form for a classified ad. Helping the man was a woman behind the counter wearing an OU sweatshirt and jeans. She was blonde and not unattractive, but was a girl who obviously didn't take a lot of time doing her hair and makeup. She would have been fired greeting customers at KFOR-TV while looking like that.

"Hi Jenny!" she called out with a sparkling grin.

"Hi..." I replied stupidly realizing that while she knew me, I had no idea who she was. I supposed it was going to be like that a lot in Ovid. Only the transformed residents who remembered their previous lives would cut me any slack. I'd have to listen carefully to pick up names of my co-workers.

It may seem to some people that I was trying awfully hard to fit in, but what choice did I have? Unlike many who came to Ovid by accident, I had come to the town knowing (although not really believing) what might await me. I knew I was now stuck as Jennifer Olson—probably for the rest of my life—and as such, I would have to make a living. Since there probably wasn't much of a job market for journalists in Ovid, I needed this job.

I wandered slowly past the small maze of cubicles, looking in vain for one with my nameplate on it. After a few more mumbled greetings, I found it—tucked back in the back of the office. From the rumbling of the presses on the other side of the wall behind my cubicle, I guessed that I was really a junior staffer since I had drawn the noisiest cubicle.

I sighed and dropped my purse down on the desk, plopping (most unladylike, I might add) into a typical office chair. Almost reflexively, I kicked off my heels, sighing in pleasure at the sudden realization of how cramped my toes had been and how uncomfortable my ankles were from being bent at an unnatural angle. Wearing heels was going to be a real pain—literally.

I looked around the desk, trying to learn as much as I could from the notes and pictures which had been tacked up in front of my desk. I could see myself—my new self, that is—in some of the shots. There was me with a handsome middle-aged couple who were probably my new parents, another shot with two girls who looked very much like me (probably sisters or cousins, I realized), and pictures of a slightly younger version of me with various young women and men. I assumed those shots to be college friends or maybe old high school chums.

I was particularly disturbed by a shot of me being held closely by a man with sparkling eyes, sandy brown hair, and a neatly-trimmed beard. It was, of course, the man I had witnessed Brenda changing into—Josh Garfield, my fiancé.

Or perhaps I should have said, Josh Garfield—soon to be my ex-fiancé.

No matter what The Judge or any other two-bit deity in Ovid wanted, I had no intention of marrying Josh Garfield or any other man. I wasn't gay, and yes, I knew that being attracted to a man while in the body of a woman did not make me gay in a technical sense. Still, I wasn't about to be some asshole's bride—particularly an asshole who used to be Brenda Altman. Even if she—now he—had been my very best friend in the whole wide world, there was no way I was going to be Mrs. Anybody. Period. The End.

Okay, I could be a woman if I had to be, but I had been too much of a stud in my former life to ever see myself in the role of the passive girl with her legs spread in anticipation of filling her plumbing to the brim with cum. The very thought made me shiver—and not with anticipation. I had already seen enough of Ovid to know that many former men

must now be women, and most of them, I supposed, had given in to their feminine sides and allowed themselves to be women in every sense of the word. Well, it wasn't going to happen to me and that was all there was to it.

"Do you have that story ready yet?" a voice asked from behind me.

"Huh?" I turned to see a dapper man with iron gray hair standing behind me. He wore a neatly-pressed tan sport coat, chocolate slacks, and a stylish tie over a crisp white shirt. "The story on strict enforcement of traffic laws that I sent you over to the courts to get. Josh has already emailed some pictures. Did The Judge give you anything good?"

I was about to admit that I had no idea what I was supposed to write about when I saw the flashing cursor on my computer. I seemed drawn to the screen and the man followed my gaze. 'STRICTER SENTENCING FOR TRAFFIC OFFENDERS PROMISED' was the headline. The story went on to quote The Judge who made the usual banal statements expected of a small-town magistrate. But I had to admit the story was well written. The author, of course, was Jennifer Olson.

"Not bad, Jenny," the man muttered, reading over my shoulder. "Work on the headline, though. Leave off the word 'promised.' You need to keep the headlines shorter with more punch if you ever want to move up to a city paper."

I had always been taught that on the bigger papers, editors liked to write the headlines. I didn't argue, though. The man seemed to be genuinely interested in my work. I only hoped when I had to write a story myself that I remembered all the things my professors back in J school had taught me. After all, I had been in broadcast news for my entire career. I hadn't written a newspaper article since college.

"I just wish Dominic could write this well," he sighed, looking over at a small office not far from mine.

"Thanks," I managed, not quite sure who he was. Something told me he was my boss, so I wanted to stay on his good side. As I had

already determined, I would need a pay check to survive in Ovid, so making the boss happy seemed like a good plan. Besides, for all I knew transformees who couldn't succeed in their new lives might well be changed into small children where they could be watched more closely—like Chelsea.

But who was this Dominic? Whoever he was, he rated an office, but my new boss didn't seem to be too happy with him. So why was he on the payroll? I couldn't imagine that a small town paper could afford employees who weren't carrying their own weight.

Since I wasn't quite sure what to do next, I decided to meet this Dominic and find out what he was all about. I strolled into his office. There tapping away amateurishly at a keyboard was a young man not more than twenty-five or so with dark, wavy hair and a serious expression making him look sort of like a young Michael Keaton. He didn't bother to look up at me, but called out, "What do you need, Jenny?"

Then, he stopped and looked at me more closely. His lackadaisical manner seemed to leave him like a discarded cape. He seemed at once more alert and aware of my presence. A wry smile formed on his lips. "So welcome to Ovid."

"How did you know?" I demanded, afraid that I had done something out of character already.

"You're real now and not one of those spooks," he told me as he leaned back and motioned for me to sit.

"Okay, but how did you know I had all my previous memories?"

His eyebrows rose. "You're quick to learn about Ovid. I'm impressed. To answer your question, though, I didn't know. If you hadn't understood the question, I would just have passed it off as a sarcastic remark. I'm rather famous for them around here, you know."

I relaxed a little as I sat down. It seemed I just might have a mentor. I hoped he could keep his hands to himself, though. I had been asked to mentor a young lady or two in my male days, but somehow, they

always seemed to end up in my bed. I certainly had no intention of becoming one of this Dominic's conquests.

"So how do you like being a girl?"

"Damn it, how did you know that?" I demanded, jumping to my feet.

"Oh, that's easy," he laughed. "Anybody could have told you used to be a man from the way you just sat down."

Now I was worried. I had taken special care to sit with my legs together so he couldn't catch a look up my skirt. "Okay," I sighed. "So what did I do wrong?"

"Women smooth their skirts as they sit down," he explained, demonstrating in pantomime. "Since you didn't, yours was hiked up a bit too far. Nice legs, by the way."

I could feel my face turning red. "In spite of that last comment, I assume you used to be a girl," I ventured.

Now it was his turn to look surprised. "How did you know?"

"Aside from the fact that a certain judge seems to have a thing for reversing people's sexes?" I asked coyly.

"Yes, aside from that."

"Well," I admitted, "I wasn't really sure, but the way you showed me how it was done, you looked as if it were a practiced move. Or I suppose you could just be a transvestite..."

"If only it were so," he said softly. "But you're right. I was a woman—a girl actually before I came here. My parents had their sexes changed, too. As you say, The Judge seems to delight in doing that to us."

He spent a few minutes explaining that he and his parents had been on a vacation when they stumbled into Ovid nearly ten years ago. "I was only fifteen at the time," he said wistfully, "and I was a cute little thing if I do say so myself. The Judge told us if he hadn't changed us, we would have died in a traffic accident outside Dallas in a couple of days. I suspect he was telling the truth—one of the few things he's ever straight about."

“So what happened to your parents?” I asked.

He shrugged. “You’ve met mom, or I guess I should say dad since The Judge switched their sexes, too. He and mom own this rag. Don’t bother talking to them like this, though. They don’t remember who they were.”

That seemed a common enough problem in Ovid. At least I now knew why his father—the man I had spoken with moments earlier—tolerated Dominic’s obvious ineptitude. I just nodded while he went on. “In the scheme of things, I was expected to take over the family business. Since I couldn’t expect to leave Ovid, it seemed I’d have to go along. So here I am—Dominic Michael Woods Junior—heir apparent to the vast publishing empire known as Ovid Newspapers, Inc. Are you impressed?”

I was enjoying him in spite of myself. His sarcastic wit struck a nerve with me. Of course I didn’t notice that he was also good looking. There was no way I was going to fall into the trap of being a normal heterosexual girl. The Judge might be able to turn me into a girl, but he and his whole Olympian army couldn’t get me romantically involved with a guy.

“I might be impressed—assuming Ovid Newspapers is more than just this one paper.”

“Oh it is!” he boasted with mock pride. “We also publish *The Weekly Shopper* and do programs for the Capta College sports events. We are a large, large newspaper firm.”

I laughed, “Well, you seem to have found a home here in Ovid.”

His face turned suddenly serious. “A home? Not really. No matter what they tell you, Jennifer, this isn’t a paradise: it’s a prison. My parents—now they’re the lucky ones. Their thoughts and personalities were taken from them, ripped away and replaced by mom and pop running a mom and pop newspaper in a town that shouldn’t even be here. And for what?”

That was a question I had been asking myself. Dominic didn’t wait for

an answer, though, continuing, "I'll tell you for what! This is just being done for their amusement. They like to watch us dance like puppets on strings."

"How is it that you can even say that?" I asked. "I thought there was something in the air that made everybody a good little Ovidian."

He nodded with approval. "You really are a sharp one, Jenny. Can I call you Jenny? Good. You're right. With all newcomers, they put a lot of pressure on to make sure everyone conforms to their way of thinking. Those who don't conform are... dealt with harshly, shall we say? Adults get turned into children and children get turned into babies. The really hard cases find themselves turned into animals or even plants."

"Yet you are still who you were when you were first changed," I pointed out.

"That's because I wouldn't let anyone else know about how I feel. It's too dangerous."

"Then why tell me?"

If Dominic was ruffled by the question (as the reporter in me hoped he would be), he didn't show it. Instead, he actually grinned. "My, my, you are just full of good questions, aren't you? Okay, here's your answer: I've got contacts at city hall. What good newspaperman wouldn't? Anyhow, my contact overheard The Judge's assistant and that Jager bitch they always give their victims for an attorney. So I know you used to be a hotshot anchorman at an Oklahoma City TV station, although I can tell you right now that no one will remember that other than The Judge and his pals.

"If I read the situation right, you actually came here looking for a story and got caught. This is your punishment, sweetheart. You get to spend the rest of your life in skirts and squatting to pee. I figure you'd jump at any chance to get your balls back. Am I right?"

In spite of myself, the prospect gave me a moment of hope, but then reason took over. "So just how do you plan to do that? I don't seem to

remember a Dominic in the Roman pantheon..."

He smiled. "So you know about that, too? Great. Don't get any more specific though unless you want to be gasping for air. As for how I plan to do it, I plan to do exactly what you planned to do. I plan to expose the whole story of Ovid."

"Good plan," I laughed. "And just why do you need my help?"

He leaned back in his chair and spoke in a conspiratorial tone, "Because they watch me every time I leave this office. They know I've been gathering intelligence on them since high school. They go through my office, my apartment, and my computer regularly looking for the evidence, but I've always been able to hide it from them. I suspect they're even able to peek in on my thoughts, but I've always been able to shield things from them."

"How?"

He shrugged. "It's hard to say. I think it may be due to some... problems I had back before I was changed." For the first time, he seemed reluctant to tell me, but I think he realized unless he told me everything I'd lose interest in his plan. "I had some mental problems," he went on carefully. "The doctors diagnosed me as a borderline schizophrenic. I could function all right so long as I took my pills and saw a shrink regularly. Then when The Judge changed me, that was all sort of cured. I say 'sort of' because I found out I could mentally shift back and forth between the new me and the old me, if that makes any sense to you."

"So I'm talking to a psycho," I surmised with a sigh.

"You're talking with the only person who might have a way of getting you out of here as a man again," he corrected me. "In a few minutes, my other persona will have to take over. This is more exhausting than you can realize. I'll probably have to go home with a very nasty migraine. My other 'self' if you will is the side of me usually left in charge, but I've been able to trigger this side of my personality when the opportunities present themselves."

“Opportunities like me?”

“Exactly.” His smile was not a warm one. “That means when you see me, you must always wait for me to tell you when I am in charge. Otherwise, I’ll be compromised.”

“There’s just one detail you haven’t thought out,” I pointed out. “I don’t have this little mental quirk you have. What happens when The Judge decides to peer into my mind and finds out about your plan?”

“I’ve got that covered, too,” he told me, leaning back in his chair in smug satisfaction. “The Judge and his ilk are only interested in interesting people. The best way to avoid their scrutiny is to be as boring as possible.”

“Boring?”

“That’s right. They enjoy watching we poor humans squirm like worms on a fishhook. If we settle into our new lives with no muss or fuss, they move on to livelier targets. All you have to do is act like a good little girl and you’ll have the perfect camouflage—which means, by the way, you have to be interested in guys, like your fiancé.”

“Brenda? I mean Josh?” I sputtered. “But we’re supposed to get... to get...”

“Married?” he finished for me. “Don’t look so surprised. This is a newspaper: remember? Your engagement announcement was in the paper. The wedding is this coming Saturday, by the way.”

“Listen to me,” I said through gritted teeth, “there is no way on Earth I’m going to marry some guy and play happy little housewife for anyone.”

“You may have to,” he insisted. “Listen, Jenny, to my knowledge, no one has ever escaped from Ovid and recovered his old life. If you want to have any chance at all, you’ll have to have help from outside Ovid, and the only way you’ll be able to get that is to help me expose all of these imposters. If that means you have to be a happy little housewife as you put it, then you’d better do it with a smile on your face. Otherwise, we’ll both be stuck here living lives we don’t want for

the rest of our days.”

As sickening as it seemed, he might be right, I realized. Chelsea Bridgewater was adequate proof of that. Her freedom from Ovid had been short-lived and her punishment intense. Even if she had managed to stay out of The Judge’s clutches, she would have remained a girl for the rest of her life. Unless I wanted to be equally female for the rest of my days, I would have to expose Ovid and hope that The Judge and his minions weren’t powerful enough to stop the entire US government. Since I had no real plan of my own, I’d have to follow Dominic’s lead.

That didn’t keep me from trying to formulate another plan—one which would not involve the intense young man I had been forced to work with. I kept turning over ideas in my mind as I drove home in my little Mazda. Unfortunately, no good plan came to mind.

I had allowed my mind to go rather blank, depending upon the auto pilot functions Chelsea told me about. Of course, I probably could have found my new home just by driving around the town until I found the street listed on my driver’s license. Ovid wasn’t that big a town after all.

‘Home’ turned out to be an apartment building that looked almost brand new. It wasn’t as large as the newer apartment complexes in Oklahoma City or other large cities, but it was modern in design, with lots of nice landscaping and a small swimming pool nestled between the two three story buildings. The pool had already been drained for the winter, so the courtyard surrounding it was deserted.

My apartment was on the third floor. That was going to be a real bitch since there were no elevators and climbing steps in heels made me feel as if I would tumble backwards any moment. Besides, now that I was a girl, my strength was a fraction of what I enjoyed as a man. How would I ever be able to do something as simple as lift heavy grocery bags up those flights of stairs?

I finally located my apartment. It was recessed a little from the courtyard, which was fine with me. I fumbled around with my keys,

trying to determine which one would open my door when the door flew open.

I was shocked to see an attractive blonde standing in the doorway in a pair of tight jeans and a burgundy Capta College sweatshirt, but no more shocked than she appeared to be. “Hi, Jenny,” she greeted me warily. “You’re home early.”

“I am?” I asked stupidly. It had been nearly five when I left the office, and there had only been a couple of us still there. I had been using my time at my desk to find out as much about my new identity as I could and had lost track of the time.

“You... remember who you were, don’t you?” she asked carefully, as if unsure of my answer.

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I guess you do, too.”

She nodded. “Come on in. Let’s get to know each other.”

I was ushered into a neat living room with comfortable but completely feminine touches. I’ve always been astounded at how two girls can live together more orderly than one man. Everything was neat and clean, except for a thick tome lying open on the couch. The girl, who was obviously my roommate, picked up the book and sat on the couch, patting the cushion next to her in an obvious invitation for me to sit next to her.

As I sat on the cushion, I couldn’t help but think of how two men who didn’t know each other would have handled the situation. Both men would remain standing, or at least sitting far apart, until some accommodation had been established. Not so with girls, though. As much as I would have liked to sit next to her in my male body, I felt a little uncomfortable sitting that close to her now that I too, was a woman.

She turned to me and smiled. “I’m Cynthia Lyons—your roommate.” She brushed a strand of long blonde hair behind her ear. “Welcome to Ovid.”

She gave me a quick bio of herself. Apparently she was a year

younger than me and a senior at nearby Capta College, majoring in psychology. She didn't volunteer any facts about her previous life or ask any of me. I was already learning that the transformed citizens of Ovid did not like to discuss their prior lives freely.

"It's not considered polite," she explained, confirming my suspicion. "Most people aren't comfortable talking about their previous lives until they get used to their new ones. Even then, their old lives are just that—old lives. They lack meaning for most people."

I nodded, understanding that. I certainly had no desire to tell her that until that morning, I had been a man several years older than I was now. I wondered if the women who were changed into men were more reticent about such matters. Most men—including me—viewed becoming female as a demotion according to the popular myths. Would women view their transformations as a promotion? Gee, wouldn't that make an interesting feature article for the *Ovid Chronicle*? Of course, there was no way The Judge would ever allow it to be printed.

"I'm sure you have some questions about your new life," she prompted.

I had had a number of questions answered by Dominic, but I didn't want her to know anything about that. I also didn't want her to know that the only thing I wanted out of my new life in Ovid was out of my new life in Ovid. Dominic had cautioned me to act as if I was trying to fit in and so I would. I sat patiently as she described the artificial life of her roommate and best friend. It seemed I had just graduated from Capta myself and had been hired by the Chronicle after a successful editorship of the college paper.

My family was supposedly from out of state and my parents would be attending my wedding, flying in from Atlanta in a couple of days. Where The Judge was going to get a family for me was beyond me, but I was sure he had thought that out.

Then it came time to discuss my love life. "You've probably noticed that you're wearing an engagement ring," she ventured.

“Yeah,” I sighed. “So everyone tells me. I don’t know about this, Cynthia...”

She smiled brightly. “Well, if you don’t want Josh, can I have him?” Looking at the dumbfounded expression on my face, she laughed, “I was just kidding.” Then more seriously, she added, “You do know you’ll have to go through with it, don’t you?”

“I get the idea I don’t have much of a choice,” I replied, remembering Dominic’s admonition. “I don’t, do I?”

She shook her head. “I’m afraid not.” Then more brightly, she added, “But it won’t be so bad, really. I’m going to be your maid of honor, and Josh is a hunk, even if he is a shade.”

“Not any more he isn’t,” I told her. “He came here with me,” I explained, not revealing Brenda’s true sex.

“That’s great!” Cynthia said cheerfully. “Then it won’t be nearly so traumatic for you since you already know each other.”

No, not traumatic at all, I thought to myself, if we can just figure out who gets to do what and with which and to whom.

“Look, I don’t really want to get married so soon,” I protested. Dominic said I would have to get married, but it wouldn’t be natural if I didn’t protest some. “Can’t I at least move back the date or something?”

She shook her head. “That wouldn’t be a good idea. Invitations have been sent, your parents will be here, your dress is here... Oh! Your dress—you have a final fitting tomorrow at nine in the morning. I’ll go with you. I’ll have you know I’m cutting a class to do it.”

She rambled on and on until I almost began to believe it was her wedding that was coming up in just a few days. Did all girls get so excited about weddings? Of course they did, I realized. A wedding was probably the biggest positive event in a woman’s life, with the possible exception of childbirth—if you could call that positive. I was going to be surrounded for the next few days by girls like Cynthia who would live vicariously through my whole wedding experience. The only girl around who wasn’t looking forward to it was yours truly.

Cynthia proved to be a godsend, though. She helped me through my first evening as a woman, explaining things to me as they came up. She found some casual clothes for me to wear—just jeans and a sweatshirt like hers—and I found I really didn't feel too different from my old male self in unisex attire.

That's not to say I felt exactly the same. Hair tickled the back of my neck and the earrings I hadn't bothered to remove from my ears produced a tiny but discernible tug on my lobes. And frankly, it was impossible not to notice the controlled swaying of my new breasts even inside their bra, but most noticeable was the conspicuous absence of anything dangling between my legs.

In a strange way, the lack of anything down south was actually more comfortable. I found I could cross my legs more comfortably, and when I sat down, there wasn't the feeling of something being squeezed between my legs. Still, I would have probably sold my soul just to have the family jewels back in place.

Cynthia helped me to cope with my new equipment as well. After we had eaten a light dinner consisting of soup and a salad she had made up, she noticed I was looking a little uncomfortable and asked me about it. Well, I was going to have to ask the question soon, so it might as well be now, I thought.

"Uh... Cynthia," I asked, embarrassed, "just how do I pee?"

"How do you pee?" she echoed, laughing. "How did you pee before?"

I suddenly realized I had never told her that I had been a man, but she seemed to know intuitively that I had been one. I supposed it wouldn't be that hard for a natural woman to realize I was new to the whole experience. "It's... uh... kind of hard to explain. I just... went."

"Well it's the same for girls," she said with a grin.

In retrospect, she was really right. It was just a matter of relaxing and letting it flow. My body knew what to do even if my mind didn't. Still, I was very glad she remained just outside the bathroom door, coaching me all the way.

I think as I sat there wiping myself for the first time, I realized just how calamitous my situation was. Unless Dominic's plan worked and the Marines came storming in to rescue me, I would soon be married, and that same slitted area between my legs would be the focus of something even messier than peeing. It was so damned small! How could a man's... how had I, for that matter, ever penetrated such a small opening?

I have since learned that many young girls wonder the same thing, so I suppose my worries were not that far out of line. And as for having a baby come out of there... I could only hope for a quick rescue to save me from ever worrying about that.

I was still recovering from my unsettling experience on the toilet when the doorbell rang. Cynthia jumped up to get the door and grinned. "I'm not expecting anyone, so who could that be?"

She knew as well as I did who it was. I guessed Brenda must have been under some of the same constraints I found myself burdened with—he was expected to play the fiancé in our new existences, and it was no surprise when I heard a male voice say, "Uh... hi. I'm..."

"Hi, Josh," Cynthia said, saving him the embarrassment. "I'm Cynthia. Jenny's watching TV, so I'll leave you two alone in the living room."

The grin was still plastered on her face when she passed me, heading for her bedroom with the textbook she had been reading in hand. I wanted to tell her I didn't want to be left alone, but she was out of the room before I could say it.

The man facing me wasn't the same befuddled fellow changeling I had last seen in The Judge's courtroom. He was dressed the same, with the addition of a gray herringbone sports coat, but there appeared to be no trace of the woman who I had known as Brenda. For a moment, I had a sudden fear that some individuals might lose their memories hours or even days after being transformed. That would mean I might soon find myself a happy little girl about to be married and settle down to make babies.

Fortunately, Josh's next statement left no doubt that he remembered

his real life. "I never realized how great men had it," he said suddenly and unexpectedly, a satisfied smile on his face.

"You like being a man?" I asked him from my place on the couch.

"Didn't you?"

"Well, of course," I replied defensively. He had me there. "I just never realized..."

"That a woman would like being a man?" Josh shook his head. "You know, when it first happened, I thought it was the end of the world. I felt so big and bulky, and this beard felt really strange. And the first time I tried to cross my legs, I hurt myself so badly I thought I was going to die. But once I got settled in, I began to see its advantages. I mean look at me. The only thing I had to do to get a little dressed up for the evening was throw on this sports coat. I didn't have to worry about evening makeup or how my hair looked or what outfit went with what shoes."

"Well good for you," I tried to growl, but it didn't sound like much of a growl. "What about me?"

He shrugged. "What about you? You look like you're fitting in okay. I heard you're a reporter, so it can't be too bad."

"Can't be too bad?" I exploded. "Are you blind? I'm a fucking woman!"

Josh sat down unperturbed in a nearby chair. "Excuse me for not being more sympathetic, but if you'll recall, I was one for a number of years and I don't remember ever being this upset about it."

"Not even when you were raped?" I shot back, suddenly wishing I had left my big mouth shut.

"No, not even then," he admitted, not apparently upset by the question. "That's all ancient history now. And if you're worried about that, you can forget it. I understand the likelihood of that happening in Ovid is pretty slim."

"Who told you that?" I asked, curiosity momentarily replacing my anger.

“Tony Ross,” he replied. “He runs the jewelry store right down the street from my studio. By the way, he’s going to be my best man.”

“You... you really want to go through with the wedding?” I asked, stunned. Dominic had told me I would have no choice but to go through with it if our plan was to work, but Josh had no such reason. I couldn’t imagine how a man who had been a woman only hours ago could be so ready to marry a woman. Maybe Dan was wrong. Maybe Brenda had been gay after all.

“It’s probably for the best,” he told me, unnerving me with his calmness.

“The best?” I echoed numbly. Brenda and I had fought like cats and dogs since the moment we met. How could this new man possibly contemplate marrying me? What was she—he—thinking about?

“Sure,” Josh said rather cheerfully. “We’re stuck here for the rest of our lives. Don’t look so shocked: surely you realized that. Whatever lives our identities had before led us to each other. I think we can be of great help to each other in sorting all of this out.”

“But we weren’t exactly lovers in our previous lives,” I argued. “In fact, I always got the idea you couldn’t stand me. And now you want to marry me?”

His face became more serious. “Look, Ash—I mean Jenny. I never hated you. I think I hated myself—what I was.”

“I don’t understand. I thought you said you didn’t hate being a woman.”

“I didn’t. What I hated being was a victim. I told you what happened to me. I think after that, I became disgusted that my own body could attract such an animal and be used by him. I didn’t want to ever be used like that again.”

“Even if it was in a loving situation?”

Josh shook his head. “That wasn’t going to happen. I never wanted a man to get that close to me again. I wouldn’t allow it from any man—even you.”

“Me?”

“I was attracted to you. No, don’t protest. I know you had a reputation with women, but I also know you never used them unwillingly. It was a mutual relationship, as chauvinist as it might have seemed sometimes. But I couldn’t bring myself to allow my attraction to lead me to... to its obvious conclusion.”

I was actually touched by his admission. Of course, it gave me far too much credit. When I was Ash, I liked a variety of women. I had never planned to settle down, so what usually happened was that any woman I bedded would eventually decide I wasn’t going to give her a ring and would move on. That was always fine with me. But I suppose to my credit, I never told any of them that she was the one and only. I always made it clear that the relationship would be strictly for laughs. That didn’t mean they always believed me, but at least I had warned them. Is that what Josh had meant when he called my relationships mutual? Well, I suppose compared to Brenda’s relationship with my counterpart at that other station, I was at least civilized in my behavior.

I also thought back to what Susan Jager had said about what would have happened to Brenda and me had we not sneaked into Ovid. I don’t mean the part about dying: I mean the part about the two of us being engaged. Could that really have happened? If so, it would have meant that I would have gotten over my aversion to marriage and Brenda would have gotten over her distrust of men. Perhaps together we would have seen that accomplished.

Unfortunately, we didn’t have that time now. Instead, we were about to be involved in the closest thing the gods could probably devise to a shotgun wedding. We were about to be married whether we wanted to or not.

Strangely enough, though, Josh seemed to be all for the marriage. I had hoped just a little that he would call it all off so I wouldn’t have to go through with it. That way, the gods would have been entertained by Josh and would take the spotlight off me, leaving me free to help Dominic without having to prepare for an unwanted wedding. No such luck, though.

“I suppose we can give it a try...” I murmured, not really believing it but merely following Dominic’s suggestion.

Josh jumped out of his chair, surprising me as he sat next to me on the couch, slipping his arm around me and pulling me to him. “That’s great, Jenny,” he said, muffling my own potential reply by pressing his lips against mine.

I fought the impulse to sputter and push him away, but only for a moment. That isn’t to say I then did those things. Strangely enough, I found myself suddenly relaxing in his arms—even wrapping my own arms around him. The kiss seemed somehow pleasurable, and his strong arms around my waist made me feel almost as if he would protect me from all the worries of the world. It was a strange but pleasant sensation that shot through my body. It seemed somehow... right.

What the hell was going on? Chelsea had mentioned something about suspecting there was a residual magic attached to the transformation spell, but she hadn’t indicated that it took place so quickly. Surely finding pleasure in kissing a man would take me longer than a few hours. At this rate, I’d be snuggling up next to Josh by tomorrow night while wearing a sexy negligee begging him to screw my brains out.

That simply wasn’t going to happen. “Down, boy,” I murmured, pushing him away with whatever willpower I could muster, which fortunately was just enough.

He looked disappointed, but he had the good graces to be a little embarrassed. “Sorry, I just got carried away for a minute.” He shifted uncomfortably, alerting me to the fact that one part of his new anatomy was still getting carried away. “Sorry,” he said again when he noticed my eyes looking at the tent in his khakis.

I couldn’t help it: I broke out laughing. “Today, my boy, you are a man,” I chortled. It was a relief to be able to laugh. It was the first time since my transformation that I had found something to laugh about.

He stood uncomfortably. “How... what do I do to get rid of it?”

I thought about explaining masturbation techniques to him, but as upset as embarrassed as he was I saw no reason to add to his misery—or pleasure. “Just give it a few minutes,” I told him. “By the time you get to your car, it should start going down—especially if it’s getting chilly out there.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “See you tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

When he was gone, Cynthia came out of her room. “What was all the laughter about?” When I told her, she laughed even harder than I had. “Oh, the poor guy,” she giggled.

I was still chuckling to myself when I decided to try to get some sleep. I stopped chuckling when I stripped off my panties, though. They were damp and smelled of something I had experienced only with my partners when I had been male. Just because I didn’t have anything to get hard any more, I had assumed that the only reaction to our kissing had been from Josh. Not so, I realized.

It wasn’t a conscious reaction, I reminded myself as I dressed in a pair of feminine but practical pajamas. It was just my female body with all its female hormones causing the reaction. But what was going to happen after the wedding when Josh was carrying me to our wedding bed? He was obviously going to be hard as a rock then. Was I going to be tingling between my legs, softening and becoming moist in anticipation of being made a woman? No... I just couldn’t let that happen, I told myself. Just to make sure, I locked my knees together tightly before going to sleep.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t even get away from my new sex in sleep. I saw myself in my dreams lying in a bed, my legs spread apart as Brenda loomed over me, morphing suddenly into Josh. I felt something pleasant between my legs and gaped in a mixture of pleasure and horror as the ‘something’ became larger and harder...

“I can’t do it!” I announced without preamble just after I stormed into

Dominic's office.

His expression turned from one of confusion to a sterner expression as my presence triggered the hidden personality lurking within him.

"Can't do what, Jenny?"

I plopped down (quite unladylike) in one of his chairs. "I can't marry Brenda—Josh—oh whatever his name is!"

Dominic leaned back in his chair, studying me intensely. "I thought we agreed it would be necessary to go through with the wedding so as not to arouse suspicions."

"It's not just the wedding," I explained. "It's... it's what comes after the wedding."

Realization spread across his face. "Is that all that's worrying you?" There was relief in his voice.

"Isn't that enough?" I shot back. "I'm not a girl—at least not in my head. I don't want any part of sex with a man."

"And you shouldn't have to," he assured me.

"What? What about the honeymoon?"

"Jenny," he began, "The Judge isn't about to let you and Josh go traipsing off to some honeymoon resort. You might not come back. Few people in Ovid are so trusted that they're allowed to leave town for any reason."

"But wouldn't people—even the ones who lose their real memories—start noticing that they're trapped here?" I asked.

"Sure—if they knew. As nearly as I've been able to figure out, what happens is that people only think they're leaving town, but in reality, they're shunted off to some holding location where lucid dreams convince them that they've travelled outside Ovid. That's the way your honeymoon will be. You'll remember making love to your new husband, but it won't really happen. Then, when you get back here, just tell him your period has started. It won't really start for several weeks, but he won't know that. By the time your phony period ends,

we should be rescued.”

“It seems like a lot of your plan depends upon perfect timing,” I grumbled.

He nodded. “That’s true, but can you think of a better one?”

Unfortunately, I couldn’t.

“Phone call for you, Jenny,” a secretary called from the doorway.

“I’ll have everything ready for you to deliver by tomorrow,” Dominic told me. I nodded and went to answer the phone.

“Where are you?” Cynthia chided me on the phone.

“At the office...”

“You have a fitting at nine,” she reminded me. “It’s ten after now. Get down here, girl!”

So I rushed out of the office yelling over my shoulder that I was late to an appointment. It hadn’t taken me long to figure out that even at a small paper like the *Ovid Chronicle*, reporters came and went pretty much at will. It was only fair, given that reporters had to attend night and weekend meetings. Besides, one look at a pay stub in my purse had shown me why Jenny Olsen had a roommate—on the wages I made I couldn’t afford a place on my own, even in a small town like Ovid.

Cynthia had given me directions to March’s Department Store although I hardly needed them. One drive down Main Street had been enough to locate March’s. Three stories high, it was the tallest and most impressive business building in Ovid. It was the sort of business that had been replaced by Wal-Mart stores in most smaller towns, but I had already noticed that the well-known chain stores seemed to have no outlets in Ovid. I suppose it would have been hard for corporate execs to understand why sales were coming in from a nonexistent town.

As I made my way up to the top floor of March’s where the bridal department was located, I resolved to be cautious. I had little doubt

that like Vulman Industries, March's was probably controlled by one of the gods since it was an important fixture in the town. My suspicions were confirmed when I saw Cynthia standing next to the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Vera March would have been called a goddess even by those who had no idea how correct they were. Given her beauty and the first two letters of her first name, I was pretty sure I was about to be fitted by Venus herself.

After the usual greetings and smiles, I tried to steel myself against a mental assault I had every reason to believe was about to be perpetrated on me. Venus was a love goddess, and what better place for a goddess to be than in a location where new women would have to come to shop? Once there, she could subtly influence them into being more like natural women. I wondered how many new women had come in to see Vera March only to leave with their minds far more feminine than when they had entered the store.

"This looks gorgeous on you," Vera said as she arranged the puffed sleeves of my wedding gown. I had to admit looking in the mirror that I made an attractive bride. I kept reminding myself, though, that I was only going through with this to lull my enemies into a false sense of security. If it weren't for Dominic's plan, there would have been no way for me to be modelling a wedding gown.

"Yeah, it looks great," I replied, not untruthfully, but I hoped my responses would be sufficient to keep the goddess from messing with my mind.

They weren't.

I found unbidden thoughts coming to the forefront of my mind—actually more feelings than thoughts. My body actually tingled as Vera March said, "Josh is just going to love you in this. You're a lucky girl. He's a great guy."

Yes, Josh is a great guy... a great guy...

No!

"No! I mean yes, Josh is a great guy," I told her, hoping the mental

pressure she was subjecting me would subside. To my relief, it did seem to let up just a little. She seemed satisfied with my response.

“I understand he’s taking you to an island resort for your honeymoon,” Vera said in a soothing tone. The statement conjured up a disturbingly pleasant image in my mind of being ravished by Josh while the sun set majestically over a deep blue ocean. Then I remembered Dominic’s assurances that the entire honeymoon would be nothing but a dream.

“Uh... yeah,” I played along, looking at my image more critically in the three-way mirror. I had to change the subject or I’d be so wet I’d probably have my legs spread on the floor of Josh’s studio before the day was over. “Say, isn’t this hem a little uneven?”

“It looks fine to me,” Cynthia interjected.

Vera March looked a little unhappy to have her concentration interrupted, but she recovered quickly. Fortunately for me, I had accomplished my goal. I was relieved to find that I could fight back in limited ways. I was beginning to suspect that because I had been forewarned about Ovid and the gods, I actually had a chance of deflecting some of their attempts to alter my mind. Forewarned is forearmed as the old saying goes.

Not that it would do me a whole lot of good, I thought to myself as I headed back to work. I was still going to have to marry Josh. At least the honeymoon wouldn’t be for real, and hopefully Dominic’s CD would rally the authorities to locate Ovid and force the gods to return all of us to normal. For all their powers, I strongly suspected the gods would be no match for a battalion of trained Marines.

After the fitting, it was back to work. The rest of the day was actually interesting. I got the chance to be a real live reporter although not the way I had planned it when I asked Wally to assign a story to me. I was able to move around Ovid practically at will, handling my assigned stories with reasonable aplomb. In the course of a few hours, I had attended a Chamber of Commerce luncheon where I heard Vera March’s husband speak. It was hard to think that the Classical God of

War was now a businessman in an expensive suit and trendy tie.

By late afternoon, I had interviewed a candidate for an upcoming school board election, a professor at Capta College who had written a new book on the life of Shakespeare, and talked to a class of fourth graders about what they were going to be dressed as on Halloween. And I had even written and turned in all of the stories. All would be edited by either Dominic or his father and would be published in the next day's edition. Since they were all feature stories, there was no reason for them to be pushed into the afternoon's edition. Besides, the paper went to bed about noon, so it would have been too late for even an important story. Small town papers still tended to publish in the afternoons, so deadlines were a little more lax than at big city rags.

I giggled to myself as I stripped out of my business attire and put on a pair of jeans and a sweater, thinking about what sort of important stories could ever be in the Chronicle. Let's see, just what sort of 'Stop the Presses' type story would be important enough? How about: GODS EXPOSED IN OVID? Maybe I'd get to write that story in a couple of weeks. I just hoped by the time I wrote it, I could by-line it as Ashton Wells.

"So how was work?" Cynthia called from the living room. I heard a pile of books being dropped on the coffee table indicating she had made it to her afternoon classes at least. I was grateful she had cut her morning classes to be with me at the fitting.

"Okay," I said, joining her. "It's not exactly like working for the *New York Times*, but at least the pay is shitty."

She chuckled. "So what are you and Josh doing tonight?"

I shrugged. I hadn't thought about Josh since the morning fitting.

"Nothing, I guess."

"Nothing? Hey, you guys are getting married in five days."

"All the more reason to not spend time with him now," I pointed out. "If The Judge and his crowd have their way, I'll be spending the rest of my life with him."

“True, but shouldn’t you get to know him better?” she asked.

“I already know Brenda,” I replied noncommittally.

She shook her head. “Jenny, Jenny, you’re acting like you want to avoid Josh.”

“And why shouldn’t I?” I shot back. “I feel like I’m in the middle of some kind of Medieval arranged marriage. If I have to be a girl, shouldn’t I be able to find a guy who wines and dines me before popping the question?”

“Then why are you marrying him?” she asked calmly.

How was I going to answer that? Although we were supposed to be friends, I scarcely knew Cynthia. I certainly didn’t know her well enough to confide in her. Even if I did, I couldn’t very well tell her that the only reason I was going through with this sham of a wedding was to allay suspicion so I would be left alone to help Dominic.

“Why?” she asked again.

“What choice do I have?” I finally responded. “I’m... I’m forced to play the cards I’ve been dealt. I don’t like to think of what The Judge might do to me if I refused to marry Josh.”

Without another word, she walked over to the phone and dialled a number.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

She ignored me and said into the phone, “Josh? Hey, I was just thinking we ought to all do something this evening—you know, maybe go out to Winston’s or something? ... Great! But I haven’t got a date. Do you think... I suppose that would work. Are you sure? ... We’ll be ready in an hour.”

She put down the phone. “Good, that’s all settled.”

“What’s all settled?”

“Our night out,” she grinned. “We’re all going to Winston’s.”

“We?”

She took me by the arm, leading me to my room. “Yes, ‘we.’ I’m going with you and Josh. His best man was with him when I called and he’s going to be my date. Now come on, we need to get you ready...”

“What? More makeup? I already feel like a clown,” I grumbled.

“Yes, but a very sexy clown,” Cynthia laughed.

Cynthia worked on me like an artist at an easel. It was as if I was to be her Mona Lisa. Makeup, hairspray, undies, shoes, and dresses appeared and then disappeared once rejected as she made sure I looked my best.

When she was finished, I looked down at myself. For years I had heard women speak of the ‘little black dress’ but I never expected to be wearing one. Cynthia and I were both wearing one for that matter. I had been in skirts all day, but it was nothing quite like this. I felt as if I was half-naked with my very short hem and my low-cut front. And I knew from staring at myself in the mirror that my face was much more dramatically made up than it had been during the day. I just hoped Josh didn’t laugh when he saw me.

He didn’t.

In fact, his reaction was pretty unexpected coming from a man who had been a woman less than two days ago. Namely, he leered at me. I felt my face flush and was afraid my embarrassment showed all the way down to my exposed legs. “You look incredible,” he murmured, surprising me further by slipping his arms around me and kissing me. Pressed against me, I could feel a very, very hard organ which should have made me very, very nervous.

But for some reason, it didn’t. I made me feel... willing...

What the hell was happening to me? I wondered. Inside this feminine body, I was still a man. I wanted more than anything else in the world to have my manhood returned to me, and yet somehow I couldn’t resist enjoying what was happening to me. I hadn’t expected the behavioral side of Ovid’s magic to be so strong.

“Hey, get a room!” a man’s voice called from the doorway. Pushing

back the strange thought that that wouldn't be a bad idea, I looked over Josh's shoulder at a very good-looking man dressed as Josh was in a sports coat and turtleneck. He was about Josh's height with dark, curly hair that made him look like a real ladies' man.

"Hi, Tony," Cynthia grinned at her date. The handsome man grinned back. "Hi, Cynthia. You look great."

"You, too," she replied, taking his arm. I hadn't realized that Cynthia knew Tony Ross, but I suppose since Ovid was a small town I shouldn't have been surprised. It seemed as if everyone knew everyone else in a small town.

As much as I hated to admit it, I had one of the best times that night that I could ever remember. Even being a girl didn't seem so bad once I got used to men casting furtive glances at Cynthia and me the minute we walked into the dining room. I supposed it was the wine, or maybe it was the steaks—Winston's served the most succulent steaks I had ever tasted—or maybe it was just that the four of us seemed to get along so well together, but whatever the reason, I really enjoyed myself.

Josh was lots of fun, too. If I concentrated very hard, I could detect Brenda behind Josh's big blue eyes, but it was the good side of Brenda—her intelligence and her humor. All the bitterness and condemnation that had made us nearly enemies seemed gone, replaced by confidence and conciliation. I think it had something to do with the emotional baggage her sexual assault must have left her with. Now, in a male body, it had become more distant. I supposed that with male equipment between his legs, it was hard to visualize the sexual assault he had experienced when he was Brenda. I wished that I had known her when I was Ash but before she had been assaulted.

By the end of the evening, I had become so comfortable—or perhaps just a little bit tipsy—that I didn't seem as upset as I might have otherwise been when Tony stopped the car at an unfamiliar house.

"Why are we stopping?" I asked from my comfortable spot in the back seat where I was snuggling up to Josh to stay warm in my thin dress.

“This is Josh’s house,” Tony explained, making it apparent to me that he, like Cynthia, Josh and I, remembered a previous life.

“Oh!” was all I said. The alcohol had dulled my thinking just a bit, but not so much that I didn’t realize what was happening. Since the engine was still running, I knew Tony and Cynthia were parting company with Josh and me. I also knew what was likely to happen in Josh’s house when they did. For some reason, though, it didn’t seem very important.

Josh helped me into the house, although to be honest, he seemed a bit wobbly as well. My muddled mind had decided that I had simply drunk too much for my new, smaller body to handle, but Josh seemed as tipsy as I was.

We collapsed together on his living room couch, giggling to each other. Fortunately, I landed on top of him. I hated to think what it would be like to support his weight in such an awkward position.

“How much did you have to drink?” I asked him in a slurred voice.

“I don’t drink,” he replied, a little offended. Then a cloud passed over his face. “No, that’s not right. Brenda didn’t drink. I guess I do.”

Well that explained why he was so affected by the drinks. Even in a larger male body, he simply wasn’t used to drinking. I wondered just a little if Brenda’s abstinence had anything to do with the sexual attack she had endured.

I liked to think later that I had instinctively just rested my head on his, and that our lips accidentally touched, but in final retrospect, I think I was just giving in to the impulses of my new body. Whatever the reason, I kissed him then and there. It wasn’t as unpleasant a sensation as I had suspected it would be. Sure, I had kissed him once before at my apartment, but that had been... different—more casual somehow. The idea of kissing a man so passionately was abhorrent to my sober mind, but the alcohol seemed to make it more palatable. Still, it was odd to kiss another person and not feel the slickness of lipstick or the soft smoothness of a woman’s cheek. Josh’s skin felt rougher than mine but not unpleasantly so. And as for the beard...

well, it tickled.

In retrospect, I can remember many times when as a man, I would find myself with a woman in my arms who simply melted there, waiting for me to make the next move. Nothing needed to be said as our bodies knew what to do. The same was true that evening with Josh on the couch, although our roles had been obviously reversed. I felt strangely safe in his strong arms, and I could feel myself responding to the hardness I felt growing in his trousers. My own crotch seemed to be getting warmer and moist until...

Oh god, no! This was leading to something that my unconscious mind, dulled by alcohol, wanted desperately. But even the alcohol wasn't enough to make my conscious mind go along.

I pushed back from him, wobbling unsteadily on my heels. "Josh... no."

He looked up at me, confused. "I thought..." His voice trailed off. It wasn't too hard to figure out what he had been about to say.

"Yes, I did," I agreed, "but I can't—not yet."

He pushed himself up uncomfortably. "At least now I know why men become so insistent about sex," he sighed, looking down at the tent in his pants.

"Look, I know we... we'll..." I stammered. "I mean, after the wedding, we'll have to... get used to our new roles, but I don't want to... to..."

He rose unsteadily and gently brushed a tear from my cheek. "Don't worry. I understand," he said softly. "After what I... what Brenda went through, I suppose I wouldn't be much of a man if I didn't understand."

"You're... you're all right with it?"

He nodded. "Of course. Come on: I'll take you home."

"That might not be a good idea," I told him. "Did you see the way Tony and Cynthia were looking at each other? I wouldn't want to... interrupt them."

Josh looked around. "Well, I suppose you can stay here. Apparently

Jenny and Josh stayed together often from the amount of women's clothing in my bedroom." He grinned. "Either that or Josh is a cross dresser."

I grinned back at him. "Okay, I'll sleep on the couch."

He shook his head. "Nope. I'll sleep out here. Do you mind if I get ready for bed first?"

A little while later, Josh returned in a fresh pair of pajamas. I had always preferred sleeping in my skivvies when I was a man, so I smiled at how proper he looked in them. The tent had gone away, and the length of time he had spent in the shower convinced me that he had probably figured out the male way to eliminate a hard on when a girl wasn't available... or willing.

I was still smiling about that as I took my own shower, but I soon learned I had nothing to hold over him. My own body betrayed me as I thought back to what had nearly happened on the couch. I felt moist again, and felt a strange sensation between my legs and in my nipples. Using my hand, I soaped up my body, tarrying unconsciously at those points until... until...

It wasn't the explosion I remembered when I was male: instead, it built up more slowly, each moment becoming more and more pleasurable until a short gasp escaped from my mouth. I stopped at once, frightened by my own response, but my body began to demand more. I gently stroked myself again while my other hand gently squeezed a nipple. I sank to the floor of the shower, unexpectedly wetting my hair as the waves of pleasure ebbed and flowed through my entire body.

I sat there letting the water course over me, basking in the warm afterglow of what I recognized must have been my very first female orgasm—and my second as well. At last I found the strength to get to my feet, allowing my automatic responses to wash my hair and finish my shower.

As I brushed my drying hair, I looked at myself carefully in the mirror. I had seen myself several times since my conversion, but never had I noticed how sexy I could look. While I still was certain I lacked 'The

Look' I would need for a career in television news, I could not deny that I radiated a certain earthy beauty. I looked as if I were a fine Irish country lass, fresh as morning and lovely as only the Irish could be. My new last name wasn't Irish, but maybe I got my looks from my mother's side. The photos I had of my new mother showed her to have the same coloring I did.

In bed at last, I thought to myself that if Dominic's plan failed and I was forced to remain a woman, at least I would be an attractive one. I had been considered handsome as a man, and while I don't think I had been obsessed with my looks, I could paraphrase Gertrude Stein substituting 'good-looking' and 'homely' for 'rich' and 'poor': Given the choice between good-looking and homely, good-looking is better.

With that thought, I drifted off to sleep.

Wednesday proved to be a very busy day. Dominic promised me he would have the CD ready for me by the end of the day. "But first, I have a couple of assignments for you," he told me.

I hoped they didn't take long. Cynthia had informed me that the college sorority we both were members of was having a shower for me that evening. She was going to show me the pictures of each of the girls in the Capta College yearbook so I would know each of the attendees. That, coupled with my assignments for the day, wouldn't leave me much time to look at the disk myself. Of course, I was going to copy it even though Dominic had warned me not to, but I had held back on doing any research about Ovid until I saw what was on the disk, and I was very, very curious. After all, curiosity is one of the attributes that makes a good reporter, right?

The first assignment didn't take too long. It involved interviewing a real estate broker who was building a two-floor office building across from City Hall. It was the first new office building in Ovid in quite a while and was thus big news—front-page stuff. I tried to remain serious as I interviewed the broker, but it was difficult. He was so proud of his new building, and yet even in a market like Oklahoma City, news of its

construction would have barely rated a paragraph in the back of the business section. I suppose it did denote healthy growth for the town, so maybe by local standards it was big stuff.

My next assignment was even more small-town. I had to attend a first grade class to report on a project the kids had done about protecting the environment. As I sat at one of their diminutive desks which even in my smaller body was too tiny, each of the students trooped individually to the front of the room to recite a couple of quick sentences for my benefit. Thankfully, their teacher had given me a script, so I didn't have to take notes.

I was just about to glaze over completely when the teacher called out, "All right, Chelsea, it's your turn."

I jerked up to see a young girl with hair somewhere between light brown and dark blonde march up to the front of the classroom. She had been considerably older when I last saw her, but there was no mistaking her for anyone except Chelsea Bridgewater.

"Trees are important to our envir... environment," she stammered in the way of all young children as she rocked back and forth on her little pink tennis shoes. I wasn't listening to her words, though. I was watching her imagining her as the older girl who had started me on this strange journey. For anyone not a victim of The Judge's transformative power, it would have been impossible for them to believe the diminutive girl had ever been a twelve-year-old Girl Scout, let alone a six foot plus male biker.

The class broke for lunch, and I asked the teacher if it would be all right if I interviewed a couple of the students as they ate. I suppose it was one advantage to being a woman: I couldn't imagine a teacher ever giving a man permission to be one on one with her young charges. When she gave me permission, I quickly zoned in on Chelsea. She was eating lunch by herself—an odd situation for a pretty young girl. I could see from the way she stared at the other girls that she was just too embarrassed to become one of them.

"Can I talk to you?" I asked, sitting across from her.

“I guess,” she murmured, wary of me. Of course there was no way she could know that I was the reporter—the male reporter—who had interviewed her a couple of weeks earlier.

“I know who you are... who you were, Chelsea,” I stated bluntly.

Fear entered her eyes. “How... who are you?”

“A friend,” I told her. “Don’t worry—I’m not one of them.” There was no need to explain exactly who ‘them’ was. “I know what they did to you. I know this latest transformation was a punishment. I just wanted you to know...”

Know what? That I was about to risk everything to get a message out of town that just might change everything? No, I couldn’t tell her that.

Before I could say anything else, she broke in angrily with her high-pitched lisp, “Look, I don’t know who you are or what you want but just leave me alone! The Judge told me if I got out of line again, he’d turn me into a little baby. This is bad enough, but at least I don’t wake up in my own poop.”

“But...”

“Go now!” she demanded just above a whisper so as not to attract undue attention. “Whoever you are, don’t do anything to get us all in trouble. We’re all stuck here... for the rest of our lives. Don’t do anything to make our lives any worse.”

I could only nod and leave. I was somewhat shaken when I got back to my car. I hadn’t expected such a hostile response from her. I had only meant to somehow tell her that help was on the way. How many others were there like her in Ovid? How many hated their lives so completely? Dominic and Chelsea were two of a kind, while Josh, Cynthia, Tony and many others I had met in Ovid seemed quite content with their new lives.

Of course, maybe Chelsea would eventually conform to being a little girl. Maybe she’d even be happy about it someday. She had only been a first grader for a short time—probably just a day or so longer than I had been Jennifer Olson. I hoped for her sake that she could

eventually reconcile herself to her new life. Of course, unless Dominic and I were successful, I'd better save some of that hope for myself as well.

I had known, of course, from Susan that Chelsea was now a six-year-old girl, but seeing her as she now was had struck a chord with me, making me realize that what I was about to do for Dominic held significant risks. Who could say? In a few days, I might be joining Chelsea in her first grade class. Or maybe I'd experience something else—something worse. Chelsea had just tried to get away from Ovid: I was trying to bring the entire crazy town down.

I had at least recovered my composure by the time Cynthia and I had to go to the shower. I guess going back to the office first and writing a couple of stories had helped me forget what I might be facing, but even more important was the fact that I now had Dominic's disk.

"Be very careful with it," he cautioned me. "I've set up an assignment for you before dawn tomorrow to interview a trucker and a representative from Duggan's IGA. All you need to do is make sure that CD is in the cab of the truck when he leaves Ovid."

"How will he know what's on it?" I asked, slipping the disk into my purse.

"I've recorded an audio introduction," he explained. "When he tries to play it, he'll hear a message asking him to turn the disk over to your contact at KFOR-TV. I checked and your old boss, Wally Moore is still there."

I had given Dominic Wally's name earlier in the hope that in spite of the fact that I was no longer the anchorman at the station, whoever my counterpart there now was would have been strong enough to keep our numbers up and keep Wally there. Thankfully, he was. Of course, Wally wouldn't remember me, so the CD would reach him anonymously via the driver.

"What will cause the driver to play it?" I asked.

Dominic chuckled, "You didn't look at the cover of the CD, did you?"

I pulled it back out of my purse. The picture on the cover showed a bearded man in a black hat smiling and the title '*Waylon Jennings–Greatest Hits*' on it.

“What if he doesn’t like country music?” I asked, putting it back in my purse.

Dominic grinned. “Have you ever known a trucker who didn’t like country music?”

He had a point there.

Of course I made a copy of the CD in spite of Dominic’s insistence that I not do so. I was, after all, a reporter as well as a prisoner of Ovid. As much as I wanted to be rescued with the possibility of a return to my old life, I also wanted to know how much Dominic had been able to learn of Ovid and its purpose. Since I knew Dominic would check my desk after I left, I had both copies in my purse. One I would give to the trucker, of course, but I had taken most of the next day off, supposedly to meet my ersatz parents, but also to give me a chance to review the CD on Cynthia’s computer.

I was going to be busy between now and Saturday. According to Cynthia, my ‘parents’ would be flying in from Atlanta, and on Friday, a rehearsal dinner and bachelorette party were on tap. It was ironic that a person like me who had avoided the trap of matrimony for so many years was about to fall victim to a traditional wedding—and as the bride, no less!

“Now don’t be nervous,” Cynthia ordered me as we walked up to the imposing brightly-lit sorority house. “I’ll make sure to greet everyone by name so you’ll know who’s who.”

“Is the entire sorority going to be there?” I asked nervously, wondering how I would ever be able to remember the names of fifty or sixty girls.

“Most of them,” she admitted. “You were a very popular girl in the sorority last year. Everyone wanted to attend.”

As Cynthia ushered me in, a chorus of girlish squeals and laughs greeted me. I was grabbed, hugged, kissed and otherwise touched to

such an extent that I had a momentary fantasy of being in my old body and enjoying the attention of such a bevy of beauties. Fortunately, I didn't have to remember any names. Girls were spreading my attention in so many directions at once that there wasn't time to call them by name.

I was ushered to a seat of honor on a large couch near a cosy fireplace. Piled all around were gifts in a variety of silver, gold and pastel wrappings. Cynthia plopped down next to me while on my other side, an absolutely scrumptious blue-eyed blonde took her place. The blonde whispered in my ear, "Hi, Jenny. Welcome to Ovid. I'm Myra Smithwick."

That actually made me relax a little. I was now buffered on both sides by girls who knew I had not always been Jennifer Olson. As I looked around the room more carefully, I noticed several other girls giving me an encouraging look, as if they, too, knew I had been transformed. While they were in the minority—the shades and unaware transformees making up the bulk of the audience—it made me feel good to realize that I was not alone.

Oddly, though, I would have traded places with many of them. At least as an unattached coed, I might have an easier time helping Dominic to get us out of Ovid. As the bride-to-be, my time was very circumscribed. Even compared to others stuck in Ovid, I considered myself less fortunate. Most of these girls could dump a boyfriend they had been saddled with after their transformations. It would have been much more difficult for me to break off an engagement without causing trouble with The Judge.

"I get to hand out the gifts!" Myra called out, handing me the first one before anyone could protest.

"Who's that one from?" someone called out.

"Me!" a pretty blonde called out.

"And me," a great-looking brunette standing next to her called out.

I glanced at the tag—"From Laurel and April" the card read. "Thanks,

guys,” I said, not having the slightest idea which of the girls was Laurel and which was April.

I wouldn’t have been so effusive in my thanks if I had known what was in the gift box. Inside the white and pink striped box folded in pink paper was a royal blue teddie so skimpy that whatever price they had paid for it would have been way too much if they had paid by the yard.

A chorus of girlish squeals and giggling greeted me as I reluctantly took it from the box and put it on public display. “Just what kind of a shower is this?” I whispered to Cynthia.

The look on her face was absolutely devilish. “Oh? Did I forget to tell you? It’s a lingerie shower.”

Somehow, I made it through the evening. Some of the gifts were like the teddie Laurel and April had given me, but a number of the gifts were considerably cruder. In spite of a long and pleasant relationship with many sexy women, I had never realized that when it came to sex, girls can have a sense of humor that would embarrass a longshoreman.

“Did you like your gifts?” Cynthia asked slyly as she drove us home.

“Where did those guys find some of that stuff?” I marvelled. Over the course of the evening, my face turned red more times than a traffic light. It seemed as if every box contained something lewd and/or crude. I was beginning to feel as if my male sex life—which I had thought was quite robust—had left more than a few holes in my carnal education.

“Think about it,” Cynthia laughed. “In the bedroom, who dresses up in frilly little nothings while balancing on high heels and wearing sexy stockings? It certainly isn’t the guy. Girls are lucky if their partner is wearing clean shorts.”

“Okay, but what about that other stuff?”

“Girls just want to have fun,” she grinned.

Yeah. With what I had been given that evening, a girl could have more fun than going to Disneyland.

The shower had left me a little keyed up, so I didn't get nearly as much sleep as I needed. The alarm went off at four thirty and I somehow managed to get out of bed and make myself presentable. It was still a little chilly out, so I opted for a sweater, dark skirt and boots. I hoped the nylons would cut the cold down. By all rights, I should have worn pants, but a little vamping might be required to get access to the truck cab. The plan was that I would slip the CD into other stuff which was bound to be strewn across the truck seats. Then no one would ever know who had delivered the disk in the first place.

It was still dark when I got to the loading dock of Duggan's IGA. I felt a pang of regret when I saw the truck sitting there. If I had just been half as smart as I thought I was, I would never have stowed away on a similar rig and today I would probably be sleeping with some news groupie back in OKC. If... if... if...

There was no sense in crying about it now. I was doing everything I could to get the hell out of Ovid. I only hoped our plan worked and that there would be a way for me to get my old life back again.

As I got out of my car, a nice-looking guy in a white shirt and tie came over to meet me. He had a big boyish grin on his face and the soft Oklahoma twang that was pretty much the standard accent in Ovid. "Hi! You must be Jenny Olson," he said.

"Yeah," I replied, shaking his hand.

"Jerry Patton," he introduced himself. "I'm the store manager."

"Do you always get up this early?" I asked him.

He grinned again. "No, ma'am. But since you're going to write a story that involves us, I thought it would be a good idea to be here to greet you."

Unfortunately, Jerry Patton was more interested in getting me to write a story about his store than he was in introducing me to the truck driver. As he showed me around the store, I kept looking over my shoulder to make sure the driver was still offloading the produce he had brought in. At last, I was able to get the manager to introduce me

to the driver.

“Hoss Jones,” he drawled, taking my small hand in his large rough one. With his battered cowboy hat and rumpled clothes, he looked as if he ate and slept in his truck all the time. Maybe he did. At least he looked like someone who liked country music a lot more than he liked opera.

He showed me around his rig, explaining everything about it in far more detail than he would have if I had still been male. I guess he just figured that a little lady like me just wouldn’t understand all those complicated mechanical things like tires and trailer hitches and gear shifts. At least it was no problem to get a look at the cab.

Unfortunately, he followed me in so he could point out every switch and gauge (and sit real, real close to me, too).

While he was pointing out something to the left of the steering wheel, I was able to slip the CD into a pile of real country discs piled on the floor of the passenger seat. The die was cast. Dominic’s plan would either work or it wouldn’t. I realized not for the first time that if it didn’t work, I could be stuck in Ovid as a woman for the rest of my life.

“It’s done,” I told Dominic when I got back to the office.

“What’s done?” he asked. I realized at once that I was seeing the other side of Dominic’s personality. Come to think of it, he had explained to me that switching back and forth gave him terrific headaches, so he probably stayed in his more benign mode most of the time.

“Uh... the trucking story. I’ve written it up,” I recovered.

“Oh... good.”

I suppressed a shiver as I left his office. Between my assignments and my upcoming wedding, I hadn’t had much of a chance to see Dominic in his ‘native’ persona. No wonder his father seemed to have little confidence in him. All the initiative and intelligence seemed to be resident in his other personality.

Back at my desk, I tidied up a few things so I could take the rest of the day off. My confidence was somewhat shaken. Maybe I hadn't been too far off when I made the wisecrack about working with a psycho. What if someone outside Ovid got the disk and managed to call Dominic? The person I had just seen would never corroborate what was on the disk—he would be too timid to do so. I was even beginning to wonder if Dominic's fear of being watched wasn't a paranoid delusion.

Speaking of paranoia, I was wondering just what The Judge would do to me if this whole plan fell apart and I was left holding the bag. What he would do to me would probably make Chelsea's punishment seem like a real picnic.

Besides, I was beginning to think, was life as a young woman in Ovid really so unbearable? It was amazing how quickly I had gotten used to such male nightmares as wearing makeup, dressing in skirts, and peeing while sitting down.

And if what Susan had been right about Brenda and I getting married? It seemed unlikely, but the more I thought about it, I had always been strangely attracted to her when I was Ash. For that matter, despite her barbs at me, she seemed to be somehow intrigued with me. What if Ovid hadn't happened and she and I had gone out on another story—a big, successful story? What if we celebrated together and decided we made a pretty good team? What if I leaned over and kissed her? What if...?

Brenda.

The Ice Queen.

Why had I taken her with me to do the Ovid story? Was it because she was a great camerawoman? Sure, she was that, but what if I really asked her along just to show her I was... worthy of her?

The more I thought about it, the more I realized I had actually had fun with Josh the other night. I hadn't been worried about the fact that he was a man, because deep down inside, I saw Brenda. Were we really meant to be together? If so, had I destroyed the chance of making that

happen?

The phone trilled, bringing me out of my reverie. "Ash... uh... Jenny Olson," I answered, forcing myself out of my daze.

"Hi, Jenny," a cheery voice said. "It's mom. We're here."

This was a moment I had been dreading. Undoubtedly, my 'parents' were going to be two shades since neither resided in Ovid. They were, I suspected, created in whatever manner shades were created simply to act as my parents for the wedding. Then, they'd disappear and I would see them only when they were necessary to maintain the illusion of normalcy.

As I drove to meet them at my apartment, I tried to steel myself to act like a normal girl about to get married. I had no idea what the powers of the shades were. Perhaps they were somehow in communication with The Judge. If so, I'd have to be a typical daughter around them. I wished to myself that I had had the time to review the copy of Dominic's disk that was still in my purse. Unfortunately, I hadn't been alone long enough to do so, and now that dear old mom and dad were in town, finding time alone would be even harder.

Cynthia had already met my parents since she was between classes. She had even gotten them coffee and was entertaining them in the living room when I walked in.

"Sweetheart!" my 'mom' called out, rushing over to give me a tearful hug. 'Dad' was next with the hugs and a quick, "Hi, princess."

Princess! My god, I thought that name went out with *Father Knows Best*. Still, I smiled and returned the hug.

My parents were a surprise. First of all, they weren't shades, so where had they come from? Was there a network of people around the country who knew of Ovid and believed it to be a normal community? Did they really think I was their daughter? I finally found out what was going on after Cynthia left for her next class.

"Surprised that we're real?" Dad asked bluntly with a smug smile on his face.

“Actually, yes,” I replied, nonplussed.

“It’s simple really,” Mom said, smoothing back a strand of red hair that made her look like an older version of me.

“Yes,” Dad chimed in, putting an arm around Mom. “We’re... like The Judge.”

“Only not as important, dear,” Mom chided him. “Let’s not have Jennifer thinking we’re all that powerful.”

“I suppose you’re right, dear.”

My mouth was open in shock. “You mean you’re g... g...”

Mom came over to me and gently shut my mouth. “Now don’t try to say it, dear. You know The Judge doesn’t like for people to say things like that out loud. But yes, in a very minor sort of way that’s exactly who we are.”

“We work for The Judge’s wife,” Dad explained, taking another sip of coffee. “She has a special interest in marriage, and since she doesn’t live here, she decided that you should at least have some support from her. Rather than use shades, she decided that we should be Robert and Nancy Olson.”

“At least until the wedding is over,” Mom clarified.

“Then shades will be good enough,” Dad added.

These gods would also be more effective chaperons than shades, I realized. It seemed as if the gods were taking no chances. Josh and I were to be married no matter what. The problem now was that I probably wouldn’t have time to see what was on the disk before the wedding. I only hoped the original would find its way into the right hands.

The next days were a whirlwind of activity. Having never been married—and certainly having never been a bride—I had no idea of the work required to put a wedding together. Josh was supportive and just a little wistful at times. I think as much as he enjoyed his new male body, some little part of him realized he would never have the chance

to experience what I was experiencing.

Of course, if I could have, I would have gladly let him experience it for me. I seemed to be constantly surrounded by giggling girls, cloying parents, and a host of others such as the minister who was to marry us and the vendors who would be supplying flowers and refreshments on the big day.

Maybe it was all for the best. I would have been a nervous wreck if I had had too much time to dwell on the fact that I was a woman who was about to be married. Staying busy was probably best for me.

And in spite of my earlier concerns, I did at least manage to get a look at the disk, although it was late Friday night after Cynthia and some of my other friends had taken me out for a rather tame bachelorette party at Randy Andy's. Thank god there were no male strippers. When we had gotten home, Cynthia had trooped off to bed, having left her laptop in the kitchen. It was the perfect opportunity to see what Dominic had been able to find.

To be honest, I was a little disappointed. For someone who had spent so many years in Ovid, there was really very little on the disk that I hadn't already figured out for myself. As I had suspected, most of the town leaders were gods, and some of them were very important ones as I remember them from mythology stories. Perhaps of most interest to the government was that Eric Vulman was really the god Vulcan. I wondered what some of the security gurus in Washington would make of that.

To be fair to Dominic, it appeared that only one side of his split personality bothered to research the gods, and that side was far less often in control. Still, I couldn't help but be disappointed that he had discovered very little about the origins of Ovid (other than the fact that it had been established only a few years ago and not early in the twentieth century as the local history books proclaimed), and he had discovered almost nothing on why it was established.

Who, what, why, when, where—those were the key questions all of us learned back in journalism school. Well, why not run through them?

Who? The gods. That was an easy one.

What? They established a town out of nowhere.

Where? Another easy one, or was it? Presumably, we were in Oklahoma, but if we were, why couldn't everyone find it? But okay, for the sake of argument, 'where' was Oklahoma.

When? Sometime in the last few years. Although that wasn't very accurate, it meant something had caused them to create the town.

The something was the why, and the why was the unanswered question. Presumably, the gods had been wandering the planet for thousands of years. Why would they suddenly decide to establish a community in the heart of a country that had never revered them? If they were going to build a town, why not build it in Italy or Greece?

The answer had to be that the United States offered them something those other places did not. But what?

Whatever the reason, I was too tired and my mind was too fogged with alcohol to think it through. I removed the disk and placed it back in my purse. Answers would have to wait for another day. Groggily, I dragged myself off to bed.

It was Saturday, I realized when I woke up. It was the day I was to be married—as a woman—to a man. Oh my God, what had I let myself in for? Maybe it wasn't too late to call it off, I reasoned. After all, the disk was already out of Ovid. Maybe it was already in Wally's hands. Maybe the National Guard or the Marines or Star Fleet or somebody was already on the way to rescue all of us.

Or maybe not.

Either way, unless a miracle happened, I was due to be married in just a few hours. Then it would be off to an imaginary honeymoon. At least all of that would be a dream since there was no way Josh and I would be trusted enough to let us actually leave town. But then, it would be back to Ovid and setting up house together—unless we were rescued.

Cynthia barged into my room. "Come on girl, get up! You have a hair appointment in half an hour. Then we have to get you dressed and get your makeup on."

"It can't take all that long," I groaned, my head falling back onto the pillow.

"There you go thinking like a man again," she grumbled, dragging me into a sitting position. "Now get up. I have to get ready too, you know."

Well, I had told Dominic I'd go through with it, I told myself. And Josh... I had to admit I was growing to like him. At the rehearsal and the following dinner, he was attentive and a gentleman. He seemed to be enjoying his role, and I had to admit I seemed less uncomfortable when he was around. It was strange how I was still having trouble seeing myself as a woman and yet had no trouble seeing him as a man.

With a sigh, I got up and began to get ready for the big day. Here comes the bride, guys, ready or not.

"There!" my new mother said triumphantly as she made a last minute correction to my lipstick. It was all I could do in spite of my nervousness to keep from chuckling. She had been clucking about like a mother hen as my bridesmaids helped me into the dress. I found I actually liked her, in spite of the fact that she was technically the enemy. She and my new father had remained in the background, advancing only when needed, such as meeting Josh's shade parents or hosting the pre-nuptial dinner. Now, there was a huge smile on her face as she admired her work. The expression was mirrored by each of my bridesmaids.

I turned to the three-way mirror to see for myself, and I had to admit that although I lacked 'The Look' for television, I made a very attractive bride. My red hair was styled in a sophisticated upsweep and my makeup had left just enough of my abundant freckles to look alluring.

"You make a beautiful bride," my new father said, taking my arm. He led me out into the foyer of the church, away from the doors so I

couldn't see the guests just yet.

I didn't answer his compliment. Frankly, I wasn't sure how I could. To deny that I looked beautiful would have been a useless lie. Oh, I suppose I wasn't exactly beautiful in the traditional sort of way, but I was still a damned good-looking bride. Of course, someone once commented that all brides are beautiful. I suppose there's some truth in that. What woman doesn't look her absolute best on her wedding day?

The other reason I didn't respond was that I was in something very much akin to shock. A short week ago, I had been a man and yet here I was now in a wedding dress about to become a bride. The unreality of Ovid was being replaced in my mind with the terrible realization that this was really happening to me. I was on my 'father's' arm about to be given away as a bride, as if I were some sort of commodity. Maybe I should have refused Dominic's advice, taken my chances of drawing the gods' notice and told Josh I had no interest in participating in a sham wedding. I had no desire to be a wife, period.

I watched in stony silence as each of my bridesmaids entered on the arm of one of Josh's groomsmen. Then Cynthia, my maid of honor, flashed a particularly encouraging smile before taking her turn down the aisle. They were all smiling, none of them having any inkling of the fact that the lovely bride they saw felt more like a prisoner about to be marched to the scaffold. Then, the music changed to the traditional Wedding March and my heart crashed straight through my stomach and onto the floor. It took incredible concentration on my part to keep from wetting myself with my barely-familiar new plumbing.

My father sensed my problem and pulled me a little closer on his arm, covering my hand with his free one. "Don't worry," he assured me. "You're doing fine."

All eyes were turned on me as I was slowly escorted up the aisle. The rustle of silk and satin along the white carpet sounded almost as loud as the music to be. My legs felt weak and I surprised myself by somehow walking steadily in heels which were still a little new to me. I tried to smile and must have succeeded, because the guests were

smiling back.

Perhaps a part of the audience had come to gloat, for I could see all of the individuals who had been in the courtroom with me the day of my transformation. There was my attorney, holding hands with a handsome man, the blonde who had not spoken in the courtroom, surprising me by being on the arm of the Duggan's manager who had showed me around, Officer Mercer, still in uniform and still wearing his sunglasses, Vera March and her formidable husband and...The Judge.

Even The Judge was standing with a woman—an attractive, almost regal woman. Although Dominic had not mentioned her, I had no doubt that it was The Judge's wife, Juno. Although she stood by his side, the two kept a slight distance between them, as if they were there in a strictly ceremonial role. As I remembered my mythology, they were often on the outs with each other. I presumed this was one of those times.

Then my eyes focused on Josh, standing tall and proud with Tony at his side. If Josh was nervous, he didn't show it. I was continually amazed at how readily he had adopted his new sex, but I suppose given Brenda's unfortunate sexual assault, being male was a relief.

I all but tuned out the minister's message. I really didn't need to hear it: it was the standard Methodist ceremony, and having been raised in the Methodist Church, I had heard it recited a dozen times at least. I dutifully uttered, "I do," at the appropriate point and mechanically stuck out my hand to receive the wedding band. Josh's hand was trembling slightly as he put on the ring. Maybe he was a little nervous after all. Good, I thought. At least I wasn't the only one who was about to panic.

"You may kiss the bride," the minister said. I didn't resist (I was too numb) as Josh swept me into his arms and kissed me. It wasn't the first time he had kissed me, and I couldn't help but notice that once again, it seemed oddly right. Maybe it was the corset of the dress, but I felt almost breathless for a moment.

"May I now present to you Mr. And Mrs. Joshua Garfield," the minister

happily intoned.

Mrs.... Joshua... Garfield.

Well at least I wasn't Jenny Olson anymore. No one could chuckle about that now.

None of the gods let on that they were anything but normal wedding guests as they passed through the receiving line at the reception. Of course, most of them probably didn't know I was aware of their true identities, and I did my best to act normal—or at least normal for what was expected of a new bride. Even Officer Mercer and The Judge acted as if everything was normal, both of them merely congratulating Josh and complimenting me on my beauty. The Judge's companion was a bit more open, though.

"I know you probably don't think so right now," she said insightfully, "but you will come to love your new role."

I was a little alarmed, nearly pulling my hand away from hers. Did she know something—perhaps from my touch as Eric Vulman had? "I'll try," I assured her with a nervous smile.

She must not have used her powers to read what was in my mind, for she smiled back. "I know you will, dear. Best of luck on the honeymoon."

Yeah, the honeymoon. At least it wouldn't be real. Josh had told me only that we would be on a beach, but I knew the beach would only be there in our dreams.

At last, it was time for us to leave for our honeymoon. I was dressed in a winter white suit as Josh ushered me to his car in a shower of rice. Soon we were on the road, but he wasn't heading to the edge of town as I had expected.

"Where are you going?" I asked nervously. Maybe he had decided to get a little before we left town. Now what would I do?

"It's a surprise," he told me. "Now before you say anything, it's going to be a surprise for me as well. Tony and Cynthia have something planned."

“Tony and Cynthia?”

“Yeah. They’re g... I mean they’re like The Judge.” He looked at me sitting there with my mouth wide open. “You mean you didn’t know? I thought you’d figure that out in no time. Tony told me.”

Some reporter I was. One of the gods had been under my own roof and I hadn’t even known it! I had gotten lazy. I had depended upon Dominic to do all my legwork for me. I had just assumed that Cynthia, like me, had been transformed into an Ovid resident.

And yet Tony had even told Josh. Had Josh been so cooperative about the whole wedding thing that Tony had decided to level with him? Probably, I thought.

“Who... who are they?” I asked stupidly.

Josh just smiled. “You know we can’t talk about that—at least not directly. Indirectly, though, is another matter. For example, did you know that the Romans and Greeks had dozens of minor deities relating to love and marriage? No? Many of them were very obscure. Take Eros, for example. Did you know he had a brother named Anteros?”

Anteros... Anteros... Anthony Ross!

“And Juno was the chief goddess of marriage. One of her assistants was called Cinxia...”

Cynthia, of course.

I thought back on our double date a few nights ago. No wonder Tony and Cynthia looked as if they knew each other. They had probably been close since before Julius Caesar was a pup. How many other transformees had they brought unsuspectingly to the altar?

“But if you knew they were influencing us...”

“Why did I let it happen?” Josh finished for me.

I nodded.

“Jenny, I loved Ash,” he admitted. Nothing could have shocked me

more. “I know what you’re thinking. I was surprised when I discovered it, and I didn’t really discover it until we came to Ovid. I gave you—Ash—a hard time. I know I did, but it was just self-defense. When a woman has been... hurt like I was, it’s hard to get close to another man—and it’s especially hard when another man reminds her of the one who hurt her. You were an anchor, just like the... other man. Then we came to Ovid. With our changes, the slate was wiped clean. I could be attracted to you—not the surface ‘you’ but the real you—your soul.”

Unbidden, a tear was forming first in one eye and then the other. I tried to imagine if things had been different—if we hadn’t been transformed and if Brenda had slowly found herself in my arms. What would have happened? According to Susan, we would have fallen in love. Perhaps we would have, I had to admit.

“Here we are.”

“My apartment?” I asked.

“That’s where I was told to go,” he replied.

Tony and Cynthia were waiting for us when we walked in, which was odd since they had still been at the reception when we left. But of course, what were little problems of time and space for gods?

Cynthia gave me a warm smile. “I see by the look on your face that you know who I am.”

“I thought you were my friend,” I growled—well, as close to growling as I could manage.

“Jenny, I am your friend,” she replied, grasping my arms. “Once The Judge decided who you were to be, you had no choice but to marry Josh. I was just here to make it more palatable for you, just as Tony was doing with Josh.”

I looked at Josh, but my new husband didn’t seem to be too disturbed with the fact that he had been manipulated by a minor god. “You messed with my mind...”

She shook her head. “No I didn’t. Tony didn’t either. That wouldn’t be

right. Marriage is too sacred to us to make a mockery of it by manipulating your minds. All we did was act as your guides and try to make the whole process pleasant. You would have married in the outside world if you had lived long enough. So what if your sexes have been changed? You were still meant for each other. We just helped you both to realize it.”

I didn’t argue with her because I knew she was right. She hadn’t altered my mind: I had made the decision to marry Josh based on criteria I couldn’t tell her about. All I had initially wanted to do was to throw any suspicion off me. It seems I had done that better than I could have imagined—I had fooled two of the gods.

And yes, I was aware that I was growing attracted to Josh. That didn’t mean I wanted to spread my legs for him, but I was coming to genuinely like him. At least the honeymoon would be an illusion—or so I thought then. I was about to learn differently.

“Josh, Jenny, you two have been wonderful to work with,” Tony announced. “It was gratifying to see genuine love develop between the two of you...”

Could all the gods be fooled that easily? I wondered. Maybe they wanted it to be true.

“...so as a special wedding gift from us, we have a big surprise for you.”

Oh-oh.

“As you may have heard,” Cynthia began, “we can’t let many of our residents—particularly our new residents—leave Ovid for security reasons. However, we persuaded The Judge that there could be a way to allow you two to enjoy a real honeymoon without a breach of security.”

Oh no...

“Through this door,” Tony told us, motioning to the pantry door of my apartment, “is a gateway to a secluded spot where the two of you can begin your married life. It is real and not a dream. It will be like a

private resort. All you need to do is ask for something and it will be provided.”

“Except for a TV or anything to read,” Cynthia added with a grin. “We didn’t want you to be distracted.”

Without waiting for our reply, Tony opened the door. Instead of shelves loaded with cans and jars, bright, warm sunlight poured through the opening. Beyond lay a beach with sand nearly as white as sugar. Beyond the beach, in a scene framed by gently swaying palm trees, gentle waves slapped along the edge of the sand, disappearing into a bright blue expanse of ocean beyond.

I wanted to protest, but I could think of nothing to prevent us from walking through that door. If I did, I would be under suspicion, and my complicity in the plot to expose Ovid could be revealed. I felt Josh’s hand surrounding my own smaller hand and knew that he was ready to lead me through that door. If I did, I would have to... have to...

I would have to make love to him.

The dry, heated air of my apartment gave way to moist, warm air tempered by a mild breeze as I forced myself to step through the doorway still clutching Josh’s hand. The smell of floral perfume mixed with the salt from the ocean to form a combination that was both relaxing and sensual. I looked behind, hoping I could break away from Josh’s grip and bolt back through the door, but there was no door—only a pink stucco wall.

“It’s incredible!” Josh breathed.

It was that, but to me it was also frightening. Perhaps the information I had been given regarding the dream trips from Ovid had been completely wrong, or perhaps the gods had found another way to isolate us without resorting to mental trickery. In any case, we were really standing on a grassy surface that became a sandy beach only a few yards away. Surrounding us were scores of palm trees and bushes and vines sporting flowers in every color imaginable. The only structure I could see was the one behind us, which was actually a spacious bungalow covered in the same pink stucco as the wall.

“What are we supposed to do now?” I asked in wonder.

“Maybe this,” Josh replied, suddenly putting his arms around me and pulling my body to his. Before I knew what was happening, our lips met. I wanted to pull away, but couldn’t bring my body to obey my thoughts. The kiss was pleasant—no, it was more than pleasant. I could feel my feminine body pressing closer to his larger one as the warmth in my breasts and crotch began. Come to think of it, I really didn’t want to pull away at all.

Not only could I not resist as Josh led me into the bungalow’s well-appointed bedroom, but I found I didn’t really want to resist as he gently removed my suit. I was helping him remove his own clothing with such urgency that I almost felt as if I was no longer in control of my hands. At first, I thought the autopilot I had experienced earlier had taken over, but as I willed my hands to rub the wiry hair on Josh’s chest, I realized I was in control of my limbs.

Perhaps it was because as a man, I had learned to let my body go with the flow when sex was offered to me, but whatever the reason, not only did I not resist but found myself an active participant in my own seduction. My nipples brushed against the hair on his chest as we found our way to the bed. I was now so wet between my legs that I thought I must be leaving a liquid trail across the woven carpet.

Feeling the crisp, cool sheets at my back, I instinctively tried to spread my legs, but Josh silently pushed them back together. Although I could see he was ready, his penis already swollen to what had to be an uncomfortable size, he began to gently work on me.

I began to moan as he touched me all over, concentrating on regions of my new body that I had no idea could be so sensitive. “You didn’t think I’d start without taking care of you first, did you?” he breathed in my ear. My only response was another moan.

How strange the gap between the sexes really was, I thought dreamily as I lay there wriggling under his expert hands. For a male, the urgency of the need was quick and punctuated, but for a woman, it was a long, drawn-out ritual where the body became more and more

aroused with each gentle stroke until... until...

“Oh God!” I moaned. I had never felt anything like this before in my life. It was as if my senses had been pushed over a cliff. My body quivered and literally shook as I instinctively spread my legs apart. This time, Josh did not refuse.

I had not expected it to feel nearly so good as it did when he slowly entered me, letting my body become accustomed to his intrusion. I felt him moving back and forth, in and out establishing a rhythm that my own body sought to match until I fell over the cliff for a second time. Only this time, my moan was accompanied by one from Josh as I felt something warm inside me. We had climaxed together the very first time we tried. Maybe we really were meant for each other, I thought as I let my body and mind drift into a sea of bliss...

It was the beginning of the best week of my life. There was nothing to do but lounge around together, sleeping late and making love throughout the languid tropical days. Food appeared at convenient intervals as we would find a table in the bungalow suddenly festooned with a white linen tablecloth and silver service. The food was delicious and the wines sublime, served by silent, white-coated waiters who never spoke but instead took care of our every wish, acknowledging us with a smile, a nod, or even the twinkle of an eye.

On the beach, we lounged in comfortable beach chairs reminiscent of those at five-star resorts. Our private staff anticipated our every need with tropical drinks and romantic music which seemed to come from all around us.

As for clothing, we had been provided with plenty—although everything in our closets teetered between sexy and downright obscene. That included Josh’s clothing as well. For him, clothing was brief and revealing. One look at him and it was easy to tell when he was interested. But as for my clothes...

I had been provided with beachwear that covered almost nothing, and even what was covered was accentuated rather than hidden. There were thong bikinis, tight shorts, heeled sandals, and for more formal

occasions such as sunset dinners tiny dresses cut low in front and shorter than short all in bright colors. Then for bedtime, I began to think the gods had knocked over a Victoria's Secret given the variety and quantity.

Strangely enough, I found the clothing enticing. I must have changed outfits half a dozen times during the day. It wasn't that I found the clothing particularly comfortable or practical, but I found I enjoyed watching Josh's reaction to each new outfit.

With nothing to read or watch and no place else to go, we still managed to entertain each other, with each new attempt more stimulating than the last. I lost track of the days, but it is sufficient to say it didn't take me long at all to grow to love my new body in ways I could never have dreamed of back in Ovid.

I suppose I shouldn't have been completely surprised by my mental metamorphosis but I was—until I realized it wasn't all that great a change at all. As Ash, I had enjoyed sex. The company of women had always been one of my greatest pleasures. Watching them glide in their sexy outfits and enjoying their touches and their sexual techniques had been wonderful. Now, my viewpoint had been altered, but the pleasures of watching a girl in sexy clothing turning on a defenseless man were still enjoyable. So what if I had become the girl? And as for the techniques, who better to have as a partner than a person who know exactly what it takes to turn you on?

"Where do you suppose we are?" Josh asked from his shaded beach chair, interrupting my thoughts.

I had been soaking in the ambiance with my eyes closed, listening to the crash of the waves as the tide came in. I opened my eyes, squinting into the late afternoon sun. "The Pacific, I imagine."

"Why not the Atlantic?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I've always thought the Pacific was bluer. Look how blue that water is."

"Hmm." He reached for my hand, which I was now quick to offer.

“Do you regret all this?” he asked softly.

“Regret?” I realized suddenly I had not thought of my previous male existence for days now except in the most abstract of terms. “No, not really. How can I regret it? I have you.” And I found I really meant it.

He squeezed my hand. “I was worried about you back in Ovid. You seemed... reluctant about all of this.”

I thought back on how reluctant I had been. If it hadn't been for Dominic's insistence...

Dominic!

My mind returned to thoughts of the CD I had helped him smuggle out of Ovid. How much time had passed—a couple of days? A week? I had managed to lose myself in the newly discovered pleasure of my womanhood and completely blocked from my mind my plotting with Dominic. Had the driver discovered the CD and turned it over to Wally? If he had, rescue might be at hand. But somehow, rescue no longer seemed important. In fact, rescue might mean an end to the joy I had discovered in Josh's arms. I had done something I had come to regret, and it could cost me everything I had gained.

“What's wrong?” he asked, a worried look on his face. “You seem tense.”

“Nothing's wrong,” I lied.

He didn't press me, either there or later in the evening after we made love, but he couldn't help but notice the sadness that had appeared in my eyes. Maybe he thought I was pining once again for my previous life. He couldn't have known that I no longer cared about my big story or my career or whether or not I had ‘The Look.’ Whatever look I had now was fine with him, and that was all that mattered. In the heat of the moment after my transformation, I had rashly become a part of a plan I now regretted. I only hoped it wasn't too late to do something about it.

The door appeared in the wall the next morning after breakfast.

“Well,” Josh sighed, “I guess the honeymoon is officially over.”

It was almost time to go back to Ovid, and when we did, I would have a decision to make. I could do nothing and hope the driver would have simply ignored the CD or thrown it away. Or I could assume he would discover it and force me to take action to stop him somehow. I tried to push that decision to the back of my mind. There was still a little time left for us and I wasn't ready to let all of this go. "It's not quite over yet," I told him, gently taking his hand and leading him back into the bedroom.

We made love one more time, and I did everything I could think of to make it an event to remember. After all, there was a good possibility that once we returned to Ovid, my actions would catch up with me and I would never be in Josh's arms again.

Cynthia was all smiles as we walked back through the door. "You look great!" she greeted me. "Who says redheads don't tan well?" She gave me a sisterly hug which nearly brought me to tears.

"Are you all right?" she asked me as Tony patted Josh on the back.

"Yeah," I managed to lie. "I'm just a little tired is all."

That brought a smile to her face. "They say sex is good physical activity."

Cynthia was a friend, I realized, and had been my friend since my first day in Ovid. Yet I had betrayed her. Yes, she was a goddess—or at least one of their helpers—but so what? What was wrong with deities who stressed love and affection? She and the others had saved our lives, I realized belatedly. I had allowed myself to be swayed by a mentally disturbed man into betraying them.

I had no idea why The Judge and his friends had done what they had done to all of us. Even after reading Dominic's story, I was no closer to the secret of Ovid's existence than I had been back in Oklahoma City when Chelsea had first told me of the strange place. But I had begun to suspect that there was something good—something pure about Ovid, and I might very well have ruined all of that as surely as Eve had ruined man's dwelling place in the Garden of Eden.

But maybe—just maybe—it wasn't too late.

"Cynthia..." I began tentatively, "I need to see The Judge and I need to see him right now."

Everyone in the room was silent as we all became aware of the council room once more. I looked around to see what the reactions were but found most of the faces impassive. Susan to my left seemed the most agitated, and I couldn't help but feel it was because she was steeling herself for one of the toughest defenses she would ever have to make before The Judge. Diana on my right smoothed back her long blonde hair with one hand and patted me on my right wrist while giving me an encouraging if sad smile.

"Your Honor..." I began, taking advantage of the silence, "what happened to the CD?"

"It was discovered by the driver," he told me, "and passed on as its creator had hoped. The information regarding Ovid is now making its way through official channels."

"We should take steps to eliminate those who have come in contact with the CD," Vera March's husband suggested coldly. I felt my stomach lurch at the thought of what would be innocent deaths.

"You know we can't do that," The Judge admonished him. "Things are too delicately balanced as it is. Action so soon could be disastrous for us all. You know that. Besides, it isn't our way."

The disguised God of War straightened his silk tie. "Inaction would be costly, though."

"I agree," The Judge allowed. "Action will be taken and taken soon. That is not the purpose of this meeting."

"Then just what is the purpose of this meeting, father?" Eric Vulman asked respectfully from his position at the far end of the council desk.

If The Judge was perturbed by the question, he didn't show it. "The purpose is to make everyone in the room aware that difficult times

may lie ahead. We all knew when we began this endeavor that our secrecy could be compromised. Until this issue is resolved, we must minimize our contacts with the outside world.”

I had a feeling that no one would be entering or leaving Ovid for a while.

“What will happen to the criminals?” someone a couple of rows behind me asked. I wasn’t able to see who it was.

“Dominic Woods has been dealt with,” The Judge replied. “He has been placed in stasis until such time as I have determined the extent of his knowledge about us. As for Jennifer Garfield, her trial will begin shortly. The courtroom will be closed to all but regular court personnel.”

I realized that ‘regular court personnel’ would consist of The Judge, Susan, Officer Mercer and I. As the meeting was adjourned, I followed Susan into the courtroom.

“Your Honor, I’d like a chance to meet with my client,” Susan ventured as The Judge seated himself at the bench.

“I’m sure you would,” he said blandly, “but I already have a fitting punishment in mind for Mrs. Garfield. I don’t think there’s anything you can do to change my mind.”

Jennifer Garfield had certainly made a mess of things. I couldn’t imagine what punishment The Judge had in mind. I felt sorry for her, though. Classical literature spoke of the Wrath of the Gods as the ultimate challenge for mankind, and I was about to witness it.

“Bring in the defendant,” The Judge ordered.

Jennifer Garfield looked nothing like the woman whose experiences I had just relived. She had not been mistreated, but her shoulders were slumped and her eyes were red and her face was swollen from crying. Officer Mercer placed her before the bench as The Judge stared silently at her for what seemed to be an hour, although by my watch, less than a minute had passed.

“We have reviewed the story you told us,” The Judge said at last.

“Facts seem to corroborate your recounting of events.”

Jennifer remained standing, eyes downcast. She said nothing, but I thought I heard a soft whimper.

“What you have done may have serious consequences for Ovid and for the human race,” he went on.

“I realize that now, Your Honor,” she said in a meek, shaky voice.

“However, your testimony regarding Mr. Woods and your assistance in admitting your guilt in this whole affair must be taken into consideration. Do you have anything to say before I pass judgment?”

“No, Your Honor, except I... I’m sorry.”

The room was still until finally The Judge spoke: “Your apology makes it apparent to me that you have learned that a life here can be pleasant and even desirable, but you have to learn that we expect our citizens to act responsibly as well. Since your actions have threatened the future, you will be made to look the future directly in the face.

“The future of all communities lies in their children. Henceforth, all knowledge of you as a reporter will be lost. You will be a worker in a day care center where you will see the future every day. And to make the experience even more personal, the protection I have given to all women new to Ovid will be denied to you. While other new women are safe from pregnancies for a period of three months in Ovid, you will find that you are already pregnant, a result of your honeymoon. You will soon have your own child to worry about, and the safety of your child shall be tied to the safety of Ovid as it is with all children.”

The Judge was silent once more, as if waiting for Jennifer to speak.

“Is... is that all, Your Honor?” she asked at last.

“You were expecting something else?” The Judge asked, not unkindly.

“I... I was expecting a punishment,” she explained. “What you’ve done to me... well, it has become obvious to me that I let my desire for success get in the way of what was really important. I don’t want to be

a reporter anymore if being one means the downfall of my personal happiness. As for the pregnancy, I... I think Josh will be happy about that, and I think I can learn to be a good parent... a good mother.”

“Then this court has no further business with you. Good day, Mrs. Garfield.”

She turned to face us, and I could see a small smile of relief on her face. Her shoulders were no longer slumped and her pace quickened as the doors to the courtroom opened revealing a bearded man waiting anxiously. His own expression brightened as he saw her, and she ran with new energy to his waiting arms as the doors to the courtroom closed behind them.

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Susan said, rising.

“There’s nothing to thank me for,” The Judge replied gruffly. “Now, I’ll have Officer Mercer take the two of you home. As you probably suspect, tomorrow will be a busy day.”

Just when I thought I had begun to understand The Judge, he would do something that would make me see another facet of his personality. I had expected him to be much harsher with Jennifer, but I couldn’t argue with the appropriateness of his sentence. Jennifer would be tied to Ovid much as Susan and I were—by family. She would probably still experience periods of doubt and even disillusionment, but in the end, her husband and children would be the center of her world, and by extension, she would come to love being in Ovid and being the woman she had become.

We followed Officer Mercer from the courtroom, trading looks of concern. The Judge had in effect told us our homes and community were in danger. It was too soon to tell what the result of Dominic Woods’ plot would be, but for Susan and me, and all of those like us, it was obvious that a new danger threatened us. Tomorrow would just be the start of our defense. There would be a lot of work to be done.

Ovid XVIII: The SEALs

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Maybe if I had been alert, I would have noticed something was amiss when I pulled into my parking space at City Hall—maybe. But the sad truth was I was exhausted. Jerry and I had just gotten back from a few days in New Orleans where he had attended a grocer's convention. It was just me, Jerry, and little Ashley. The twins were starting school, so I had let them stay with friends while we were out of town.

Even with a baby in tow, New Orleans was an exciting town, with plenty of entertainment and some of the best restaurants I had ever seen. The waistband of my skirt felt slightly tight as I had driven into work, and I knew I'd have to spend endless hours on the treadmill unless I wanted to be referred to as the fat lady. How did the old saying go? 'A moment on the lips and a lifetime on the hips.' Ah, the joys of being a girl.

Maybe I could talk The Judge into zapping off a few pounds, I mused after I had dropped the twins off at school and Ashley at her babysitter's. After all, he was the reason I was a girl to begin with.

And to make matters worse, as I have already said, I was tired. We had gotten home after dark the night before. By the time we had picked up the twins and gotten settled in, it was late, and Jerry and I were too tired even to think straight. We dropped off to sleep right behind the kids, too exhausted to contemplate fooling around. Besides, we had done plenty of that in New Orleans.

Even though sleep came at once, I hadn't slept well. Something seemed to be keeping me on edge through the night. I counted the days as I lay there half awake and half asleep, wondering if it was time for my period, but no, that wouldn't come for another week. Again, the joys of being a girl.

Every little sound outside seemed to bring me out of my sleep—a

passing car, a plane droning overhead, even a gust of wind. One time I woke up convinced that I had seen a bright flash. Probably a little thunderstorm I told myself, drifting back into my restless sleep.

The first indicator I had that something might be up was Susan's little Toyota parked a few spaces down from mine. Unless there was an early morning trial, she seldom had business with the courts so early, and like me, she had a baby to drop off at the sitter's, so being this early was out of character.

As I grabbed my purse and smoothed my skirt, I tried to remember if I had checked my messages. Usually, The Judge would always leave word for me over the weekend if I needed to be in court early on Monday. No, there had only been a message from my mother and a few hang-ups.

Susan was in The Judge's office already. Standing next to her was a striking blonde with Nordic features, including expensively-styled hair and piercing ice-blue eyes. Susan smiled nervously as I entered, but the blonde merely looked me over as if she was looking at something distasteful. "Cindy, this is..."

The Judge cut her off. "There will be time for introductions later," he snapped, coming around from behind his desk. "We have to move quickly. While you were gone Cindy, we had several cases come before us that had to be handled at once. Now, we need to examine one of our new citizen's memories carefully before we make our next move."

"But if I wasn't here, how can I help?" I asked. I had not known The Judge to perform a transformation without my presence since I had come to work for him. When it came time to relate the experiences of someone The Judge had transformed, I had always been in the courtroom as they were changed. I would feel a tenuous but definite connection with the defendants which could be used to establish a virtual experience with them when called up by one of the gods.

The Judge understood my dilemma and nodded. "I too, hold the connection," he admitted. "And I can pass it on to you. And yes, I

could relate the story, but it would be missing something. However, when related through another human, the story takes on nuances I am unable to provide.”

That made me feel rather special. It seemed as if I had a talent even the ruler of the gods lacked. It was both satisfying and humbling at the same time.

“I asked Susan to join us,” The Judge went on. “Officer Mercer will be here, too. I want them to see if anything has been missed.” Again, he failed to introduce the attractive blonde.

I nodded, wishing I had at least downed a cup of coffee before jumping back into my work. I was more than a little uncomfortable relating a story in this fashion. Besides, The Judge seldom asked to view a story with me, and even when he had, I had been comforted by Diana’s friendly presence. Now, I’d have only Susan to relate to, since The Judge and Officer Mercer were gods, and Brunhilde there might well have been a god as well.

The Judge raised his hand in front of my face, and I felt the presence of someone else’s thoughts invading my mind. I hadn’t expected to be starting my trance without Officer Mercer in the room, but one of my last conscious impressions was that he had entered the room too quickly for his entrance to be seen. With that, I dropped off into a deep trance...

The Marine sentry sized me up as I approached the entrance of the NSA facility at Fort Meade. What he saw was a Navy officer carrying a briefcase, looking very spiffy in his tropical whites. His eyes had focused on my shoulder boards—black with two gold stripes and a star on each, denoting a line lieutenant. He wasn’t impressed, and his salute showed it. After all, in a facility where O-6’s weren’t much more than clerks, an O-3 was about the equivalent of a shoeshine boy.

“Good afternoon sir,” he said perfunctorily. “May I see your identification?”

Silently, I pulled my ID from my breast pocket. His eyes followed my hand, and the expression on his face changed when he saw the triple row of ribbons above the pocket, topped off with the gold badge of an eagle with its wings spread standing behind an anchor while it clutched a trident. Few men were privileged to wear the badge—the mark of a Navy SEAL officer.

“Come ahead, sir!” he requested, the salute this time crisper and his expression more respectful.

“Thank you Corporal,” I replied graciously as I put my briefcase on the conveyor for inspection and stepped through the metal detector. Once through, I asked, “Can you tell me where Conference Room C is?”

“Henshaw!” he barked to a private in the Security Office. “Please escort this officer to Conference Room C.”

I smiled to myself as the young private led the way. On the whole, Marines thought Naval junior officers were soft and gave them only the respect they were required to give. However, it was different with a SEAL officer. Marines knew the physical training we had to endure to wear the badge of a SEAL made standard Marine training look like a day at a boys’ summer camp. And unlike some military training where the enlisted regimen is far more physically demanding than the officer requirements, a SEAL officer went through everything his men went through. Period.

Conference Room C was accessed only by punching in code numbers or by requesting entry from within. The young Marine sentry had to resort to the latter, telling me that whatever mission had been important enough to bring me back from Afghanistan was a high priority and highly classified. I admit I was intrigued.

The door opened and a serious civilian wearing a dark suit and nondescript tie looked first at me and then at a document in his hand. I could see the document included my official BUPERS photograph, dressed in the same uniform I was now wearing. The civilian nodded, motioning me to a chair as he murmured a few words into a small mouthpiece.

The chair was situated at an oval table lighted only by overhead lights recessed in a dark ceiling. Soft blue lighting reflecting from the walls left the faces of the others at the table obscured until I was seated. Once I was in my chair, I realized I knew everyone else sitting around me—at least on sight.

We were all SEALs. While none of the men seated with me had been on my team, I still knew who they were. All had been in Afghanistan just like me. Yes, I know there's no ocean in Afghanistan, but that doesn't mean there aren't SEALs there. America's enemies don't all stay near the sea.

To my immediate right was a second-class petty officer with short blond hair almost as pale as his white jumper—his name was 'Doc' McGuire. A medic, he had patched me up when I took a little shrapnel in the arm a year ago. He grinned at me, obviously recognizing me as well. "Lieutenant," he greeted me quietly.

To his right was Ray Hernandez. Ray was also a second-class petty officer, but there any similarity to Doc ended. While Doc was tall and lanky, Ray was fairly short and built like a fireplug with his broad chest and beefy face. I didn't know Ray well, but I had watched him best guys half again his size in hand-to-hand combat practice back in Afghanistan. He didn't bother to acknowledge me as he dozed in the comfortable chair.

Across the table were three other SEALs—two I barely knew and one I knew all too well. Rufus McCormick was a big black man who looked vaguely like the guy in *The Green Mile*. Unlike the guy in that great movie though, Rufus had a reputation of being one mean mother. Although he took no obvious pleasure in hurting people, it didn't seem to bother him much—and he was very, very good at hurting people. Every SEAL hated drawing him as a sparring partner, since he regularly if unintentionally sent them to the hospital.

Next to him was Petty Officer Third Class Chick Steele, one of the best young explosives men in the business. He looked a little like Doc, only a little darker in complexion and hair. Frankly, he looked too fragile to be a SEAL, but beneath his lean exterior was the heart of a

true warrior. His exploits were legendary. Word was that he would be offered a commission before his current hitch was up.

It was the last of the men on that side of the table I was sorry to see, for Michael Kast was a third-class petty officer, just like McCormick and Steele, but unlike them, he was barely competent. He had been in training for the SEAL program at the same time I was, and there he developed a nickname which stuck with him until that day—Tail-end Charlie. Kast was always last in everything—not because he lacked the ability, but because he lacked the drive. Word was that he was the son of a well-decorated SEAL who had gotten out of the Navy in order to make millions in the civilian world. All of that would someday be Michael's—but there was a catch. In order to inherit his father's wealth, he would have to be a SEAL.

His father had some big contracts and important contacts with the Defense Department, so he managed enough influence to shoehorn his son into our ranks. It was obvious though, that he didn't want to be a SEAL and no SEAL wanted him on his team. Yet there he was. Special Forces programs have less nepotism than most other military jobs, but they aren't entirely immune.

The sad thing was that Kast actually had the ability. He was a natural athlete who could have probably played at the professional level in at least two sports. But what he lacked was the drive and ambition to succeed. In professional sports, that might have meant he sat on the bench a lot. In the SEALs, it meant he could cost someone his life.

And finally, there was me—Douglas Harmon: Lieutenant, United States Navy. Unlike many of my Academy classmates who were spending their Naval careers sleeping between clean sheets, sipping hot coffee and eating well-prepared food in the wardrooms of our nation's warships, I had already seen action in countries most Americans had never heard of, let alone finding them on the map. I had requested SEAL training right out of Annapolis. I had seen the SEALs at work during one of my summer cruises as a Midshipman. As a starting running back on the Academy football team, I knew being a SEAL was a challenge worthy of my physical and mental abilities. It was a job for

a man's man. Once I reported for training at Coronado, I never looked back.

None of us had an opportunity to speak to each other, for the door opened again, and this time it wasn't for another SEAL. Three individuals in civilian clothes entered the room. Two were men as nondescript as the guard at the door. It was the third civilian who drew all the notice—first because she was a beautiful female and second because everyone in the room recognized her.

Freda Jorgenson was one of the most powerful women in Washington. A confidant of two presidents, she was considered the white answer to Condoleza Rice. Her pale blond hair and skin nearly more white than pink coupled with her demeanor had given her the obvious nickname of 'The Ice Queen.' While many women had been called that, it took me only a moment gazing into her icy blue eyes to convince me that the name was particularly fitting in her case.

"Gentlemen," she began without a preamble, "you are here today because you have been chosen for a special mission..."

All of us at the table looked silently at each other. 'Special' in our line of work usually meant a mission we would not be expected to survive.

"While none of you have worked together before, you have been identified as having skills which should increase the chances of success in this mission."

She nodded at one of the other civilians who nodded at his nondescript twin. Then the two of them began a PowerPoint presentation as the Ice Queen stood back, arms folded over her substantial breasts to observe our reactions. The first man didn't bother to introduce himself. It was no problem. Being a spook, I knew he'd probably just give us a false name were we to ask. So Spook #1 began, "We have come into possession of a document which has given us reason to believe that the United States has been infiltrated by a large number of agents of an unfriendly power..."

For the next hour, Spook #1 unfolded an incredible story while Spook #2 passed out corroborating bound documents to each of us. We each

set them aside to be studied later, for the presentation contained material so disturbing and unreal that we could scarcely absorb it.

According to the briefing, a hostile force had created a base of operations in Oklahoma—right under our noses! From there, this force had been conducting clandestine activities throughout the country for a number of years. We listened carefully for the nature of this operation, but Spook #1 seemed in no hurry to elaborate. Instead, he would only say that our mission would be to infiltrate this operation and shut it down by providing additional intelligence on the operation.

When he had completed the sketchy overview, Hernandez was the first to raise his hand. “Sir, this is an operation on US soil?”

Spook #1 looked blandly at him. “Yes, it is.”

“It’s my understanding that Special Forces are not to be used on US soil.”

“Who cares?” McCormick muttered across the table. “Our mission is to take out the bad guys. If they’re in this country, we take them out.”

Spook #1 smiled. “That is a very good point, Mr. McCormick. As for the answer to your question, Mr. Hernandez, you are prohibited from operations against US citizens on US soil. That is not the case here.”

“You mean a group of foreign nationals has an operative base on US soil?” I asked, sounding more derisive than I had intended. “Sorry,” I managed to add, “but the idea seems a little outlandish.”

Spook #1 nodded. “It did to us as well at first. But let me show you something.” He brought up an image on screen which was obviously taken from a spy satellite. The resolution was incredible. I looked carefully at the projected image. It just looked like farmland interrupted by a ridge of low hills. Then I noticed something odd...

“What’s that line paralleling those hills?” I asked.

Spook #2 took that question with a knowing smile. “Very good eye, Lieutenant. That is a seam—at least that’s what we’ve been calling it. The objective is inside that seam.”

“What kind of a seam?” I asked uneasily, unable to understand what the spook was driving at.

The Ice Queen replied, “An inter-dimensional seam.”

We all stared at her blankly.

“The enemy base is wrapped inside a dimensional pocket,” she explained.

“Like a bubble in the space-time continuum,” Doc suggested, surprising us all. He just shrugged and said, “Hey, I read a lot of science fiction.”

“You are correct,” she acknowledged with begrudging respect.

“According to the data we have in our possession, there is a bubble under that seam which stretches several miles in every direction. Contained inside the bubble is an entire town...”

And that was how we first learned the details about Ovid, Oklahoma.

I think I can speak for the entire team when I say that at first we were attentive and curious, but as the Ice Queen continued to tell us about Ovid, our expressions turned first to confusion and finally to disbelief. Such a town simply couldn't exist—not in Oklahoma or anywhere else for that matter. What was that about people being changed into other people and not allowed to leave Ovid? And what about the shades—nearly transparent people who walked and talked as if nothing was amiss? And then there were the masters of Ovid...

It was Kast who asked the question all of us had been wanting to ask.

“Excuse me, ma'am, but just who are this judge and all his cronies?”

There was a hint of a smile from the Ice Queen. “They claim to be gods.”

“Gods?” I repeated.

She nodded. “Yes—that's right. The judge is supposedly Jupiter—king of the Roman gods, and the traffic cop is Mercury.”

“The messenger of the gods,” Doc mumbled. I looked at him curiously as he shrugged. “I read a lot of mythology as a kid, sir.”

“You don’t expect any of us to believe this bunch are Roman gods, do you?” Kast asked derisively.

“Of course not,” Freda Jorgenson replied, her voice so condescending even Kast had the good sense to shut up.

“So who are they?” I asked at last. “Mad scientists? Terrorists? North Koreans?”

“Most likely aliens,” she replied blandly, surprising me with her matter-of-fact reply. She looked around and saw the same looks of incredulity around the table. Then she admitted, “We don’t really know, but given the powers they seem to have, we can’t rule out aliens.”

Something told me—probably all of us—that the NSA really did have proof of alien activity on Earth. Maybe all the loony shows on TV were right after all. But I knew I wouldn’t get a straight answer from her if I asked, so I waited for her to continue.

“Whatever their origin, they do present a clear and present danger. If our source is correct, they’ve been abducting Americans for years and holding them captive in this high-tech prison they call Ovid. It is our job to find a way into this base of theirs and shut them down.”

“When do we go in?” McCormick wanted to know. Leave it to him to be itching for action, I thought.

“Tomorrow night,” she replied.

“Standard gear?” Hernandez asked.

She gave him an icy stare. “If you mean weapons, no. Firearms set off alarms when they’re brought into Ovid. We’ll be going in wearing civilian clothes and no firearms. And yes, you can take knives, but nothing else. Anything else you need will be provided to you by the Agency.

“Now, until mission time, you’ll be restricted to this complex. Use the time to get some sleep and study the materials you have been given. Pay special attention to the map of Ovid our contact provided and memorize all key locations.”

“Just how are we going to get into Ovid?” Kast wanted to know.

“We’re going in by parachute—right through that seam,” was the reply.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. “Ma’am, we’re all experienced jumpers, but that would be a tough jump even in daylight. We just can’t be sure of hitting the seam straight on.”

Her smile was smug. “Don’t worry about that, Lieutenant. We have equipment which will make your insertion easier than you could ever imagine. We’ll cover all of that in tomorrow’s briefing here at 1400. We’ll leave for Ovid immediately after the briefing. Any other questions?”

Since it was obvious we’d have to wait for the next day’s briefing to find out anything of consequence, we all remained silent—even Kast.

“Dismissed!”

Our team spent the evening together, studying the material in the ready room of our barracks. To minimize any outside contact, our meals were brought in to us, so we had maximum use of our time.

As Team Leader, it was up to me to set the schedule. I ordered everyone to read the material in detail and I would quiz them on it during the evening and just before tomorrow’s briefing. I’ll say this for all of them: they took the mission seriously, in spite of the outlandish idea that we were up against aliens or gods. At least each of us had laid our lives on the line enough times to know it was what you didn’t know or dismissed as impossible that was most likely to kill you.

As the evening went on, I queried each of them, trying to get an assessment of their mental abilities. Steele and Hernandez seemed to be pretty sharp when it came to choosing potentially important sites mentioned in the briefing material. McCormick surprised me with a pretty good understanding of electronics and communications. Doc had the greatest grasp of the material, astounding me with his detailed knowledge of how to get around the town. He had memorized all the key locations as well as the map included in the material so thoroughly, I almost felt as if he was describing his home town.

But once again, it was Kast who posed some of the most intriguing questions, thus becoming the biggest surprise of all. “Lieutenant, do you see something wrong with this mission?”

“What do you mean?”

“Hey, we all just came from the Middle East, right?”

I nodded.

“When we want information, we send in drones. When we want to kick ass, we get sent in. Since when do SEALs do this kind of grunt work?”

“SEALs have been used extensively to gather information lots of times,” I argued.

“Yeah, but this is the twenty-first century. The intelligence we collect is the stuff you can’t get by drone—interviews with friendlies in the area—that sort of stuff. Hell, we could even task a satellite with resolution good enough to tell what color eyes this judge has. We know squat. You notice we haven’t been given the name of this contact who compiled this report.”

“Need to know,” I insisted a little uncomfortably.

“God damn it, Lieutenant, I need to know. Don’t you?”

“Okay,” I sighed. “If the Ice... if Ms. Jorgenson doesn’t bring it up tomorrow, I will.”

That seemed to satisfy him for the moment, but I made a mental note to be sure I asked the question. I was more than a little curious myself. In spite of the company line I had given Kast, I too had some misgivings about the mission. It didn’t seem like something a SEAL Team would be best at. Kast was right. Our job was to kick ass. Going in without weapons meant we were no more likely to be effective than any novice FBI agent.

We took a break after a couple of hours. McCormick used the time to get in a little calisthenics. No wonder he looked so powerful. Every chance he got, he was doing something to build up his already-

impressive body. Hernandez produced a deck of cards and started playing low-stakes gin with Steele while Doc looked on. Kast just read the material, as if there wasn't a break.

"Remember," I told everyone before we settled back in to finish reading our briefing materials, "our mission is strictly recon. If we do our job right, we'll find out everything we need to know and get out before they know we've been there."

"Sir," Kast called out, somehow making the 'Sir' sound like an insult.

"What is it, Kast?"

"I've already read this stuff twice. I think you should know that getting out of Ovid may not be that easy."

"Why not?"

He leaned back, looking at the thick binder in his lap. "According to this, if you try to leave Ovid, you just end up right back in town. Say you go over a hill on the west, you'll find yourself looking down on the town from the east."

"Sort of a Möbius strip," Doc commented. When he saw several blank stares, he tore a strip of paper from his notepad and twisted it together into a loop just like I remembered a science teacher of mine doing back in Ohio during high school. "This loop is really one-dimensional," he explained, tracing the paper with a pen. "You see, it looks as if you're travelling in three dimensions, but in fact, there's only one—the surface of the paper. And eventually, you'll end up right back where you started."

"Except this Ovid isn't a strip of paper," Steele pointed out. "It's a real three-dimensional place."

"Is it?" Doc smiled. "Maybe this town really is run by gods—and maybe dimensional physics don't apply to them the way they apply to us."

"Bullshit!" Hernandez snorted.

"Do you believe in God?" Doc asked unperturbed.

"Of course I do!" Hernandez returned, slightly puzzled at the question.

“I’m a good Catholic. But what does that have to do with this... this mobile strip?”

“Möbius,” Doc corrected. “Look, if you believe in God, you probably believe in Heaven, but where is it?”

“Someplace up there,” Hernandez replied uncomfortably, pointing up.

“What?” Doc pressed. “Somewhere out in space?”

“What the fuck does it matter?” McCormick boomed, clearly bored.

“It matters a lot,” Doc insisted. “What if Heaven is right here—all around us—but we can’t see it because it’s phased into another dimension? Maybe Ovid is like that—phased in another dimension.”

“Fucking Trekie,” McCormick muttered.

“Doc, you’re full of it,” Kast taunted. “Who gives a shit where Heaven is? It’s Ovid we’ve got to be concerned with.”

“So stop worrying about where this Ovid is and keep reading,” I ordered. “By the time of our briefing tomorrow, I want you guys to have this binder memorized. You got that?”

Everyone barked, “Yes, sir!” and settled into reading at the tables where the remains of evening chow had already been cleared away.

“Doc, come with me for a minute,” I said, indicating the small office/sleeping quarters that had been reserved for me at the front of the barracks.

When we were alone, I motioned for him to sit in the one flimsy guest chair while I parked myself on the gray government-issue desk “Doc,” I began, “I don’t want to bog this mission down with long explanations. McCormick just wants to break heads, Hernandez just wants someone to tell him what to do, Steele just wants to blow things up, and Kast... well I don’t know about Kast—maybe he just wants to play with himself.”

“Sir,” Doc began, “they need to know what they may be up against.”

“I’m not telling you to keep your mouth shut,” I clarified. “I’m just telling

you that most of this is pretty far over their heads. If you want to keep the team informed, just tell me what you think is going on. Then I'll decide if I want McCormick to kill it or Steele to blow it up or Kast to play with it. You got that?"

"Yes, sir." He didn't argue about it.

Doc was a good SEAL, I realized.

"Now, we've never worked together as a team, so I really need you to give me everything you've got. You've already read most of the material, haven't you?"

He gave me a surprised look. "Yes, sir. I'm a speed reader with a photographic memory. But how did you know?"

I knew because I had similar qualifications, but I didn't tell him that.

"Just tell me what you think about this Ovid."

He shook his head. "I don't know, sir. I don't know what to think. Ms. Jorgenson seems pretty sure it's aliens running the town, but..."

"Go on."

He shook his head. "I know this whole thing about Roman gods is about as far out as you can get, but whoever gave them all of the data presents a pretty good case for that."

"How so?"

"Well, look at how they operate. If they were aliens, wouldn't they have all kinds of technological gadgets? These 'gods' seem to operate without them. Sure, I suppose they could be higher in development than humans, with all sorts of powers that just look like magic, but it almost sounds as if they're downright technophobic."

"I don't know," I argued. "That shield of theirs—what did you call it? Oh yeah, a bubble in the space-time continuum. Anyhow, that sounds pretty high tech."

"True," he admitted, "but maybe they generate that with their minds the same way they change people."

I ran my fingers through my short hair and sighed. “I don’t think our Ms. Jorgenson is telling us everything she knows.”

Doc just shrugged. “When do the people who send us out ever tell us everything?” he asked. “Like why did they bother to slap a bunch of strangers together instead of working with an existing SEAL Team? That doesn’t sound very efficient to me.”

“I have to agree,” I said, adding, “I was wondering the very same thing. For that matter, why use a SEAL Team at all? With no weapons, we’re no more effective than a team of FBI agents or undercover cops. Something tells me we need to watch our backs on this mission.”

“Don’t we always, sir?”

I nodded, thinking to myself that I’d really like to take the geniuses who thought up this mission and drop them into Ovid instead of my team.

We ran five miles before breakfast the next morning. Hernandez and Doc kept up with me, with McCormick and Steele not far behind. Kast, of course, brought up the rear, but even he turned in a decent time. That didn’t stop me.

Breakfast was waiting for us when we got back. We nodded in satisfaction as we dug in, not at all mindful of having too many carbs. Unlike the pussies out in the civilian world, we’d get rid of the carbs the way nature intended—running and exercise.

We spent an hour after breakfast reviewing the mission while our food settled. I barked off questions and got sharp answers from most of the team. Kast, of course, wasn’t quite up to snuff, but even he would be able to find his way around Ovid without too much trouble. And even though he wasn’t as sharp on the facts, any question involving critical thinking seemed right up his alley.

As I expected, Doc had the sharpest eye for detail. In Ovid, we’d break into two groups. I’d lead one and Doc would take the other. He’d

get Hernandez and Steele while I took McCormick and Kast. I wanted McCormick where I could watch him. I was pretty sure he'd try to get out of any scrape with an unacceptable body count. As for Kast—well, I just wanted to make sure he didn't screw anything up.

We spent another hour in calisthenics. Then we took a rest period until it was time for our 1400 briefing.

"Split up?" I practically yelled. I had planned on two teams, but she was demanding we work as individuals. The rest of the team seated at the briefing table seemed as upset about that as I was.

The Ice Queen nodded. "That's right. Six individuals can cover the town faster than one group. Besides, wouldn't it look a little odd for six men to be walking around town as a group?"

She was right about that, at least. "Yes ma'am, but two groups can work more effectively than six individuals. Without anyone to cover our backs, whoever is running Ovid could just pick us off one by one. We stand a much higher chance of survival if we stick to small teams."

She was silent for a moment, lost in thought. At last, she nodded. "All right, Lieutenant. Perhaps you're right. Two teams would have a better chance of getting in and out of Ovid than six men working alone. Do it your way."

"Yes, Ma'am!"

"But remember, the purpose of this insertion is to verify the information on our informant's disk. This is not a reconnaissance in force. You get in and you get back out as quickly as possible."

"Then why use SEALs?" Kast wanted to know. It was a good question. He continued, "SEALs kick ass and take names. Your lap dogs here..." pointing at Spooks #2 and #3, "could take pictures and draw maps as good as we can. Are you expecting some trouble you're not telling us about?"

I figure Jorgenson's blood pressure must have shot up about thirty points from the flushed expression on her face. Her stare was so vicious, Kast had to look down. I think in that moment we all thought

she was going to jump over the briefing table and tear Kast's head off. The way her body tensed, I thought maybe she could have done it. At last, she willed a calm expression back on her face. "You would not have been my first choice," she admitted, "but we're stuck with each other."

"Then who the hell did choose us?" McCormick wanted to know.

"That's classified," she replied as blankly as she could. "Now can we get back to the briefing?"

She spent the next four hours making sure we knew every detail that had been on the disk—or at least those they had transcribed for us. It made me glad I had taken the time to drill the team, but it also made me curious. We had only her word that we had been supplied with all the information on Ovid. There were items in the materials which didn't seem to make much sense.

For instance, the material indicated that unwary travellers were shanghaied into becoming citizens of Ovid. But what would make them do so? It wasn't enough that there was some sort of invisible barrier around the town. Surely someone would have figured out a way to get out. Granted, they didn't have the high-tech tools we were going to be using, but there must have been a way out.

And for that matter, why hadn't the authorities figured out people were disappearing? The legends of the Bermuda Triangle involved only a handful of people, and yet practically everyone in the civilized world knew what it was at least by name. Why hadn't cable TV deluged us with phony documentaries about the Ovid Rectangle, or something like that?

As for the crap about aliens or gods or whatever they were, who really gave a rat's ass if they had built a little enclave in Oklahoma, because odds were that they weren't from any other world—either physical or supernatural. It was just too bizarre to imagine why they would want to set up a small town in the middle of the Bible Belt. As far as I was concerned, they were probably something like the Waco wackos—a group of iconoclasts who chose to build a small settlement away from

prying eyes. Now, somebody in their little cult had become disillusioned—or maybe just delusional—and decided to get the government interested by claiming the leaders of Ovid were deities or something.

So why were we being used? The answer was really pretty simple to me, although I didn't want to bring it up to the team. We were being used because we could perform the mission and get the hell out of the way easier than our civilian counterparts. Twenty-four hours after the mission, we could be back in Kabul, and if there were any questions to be asked, there would be no one from the mission remaining to ask them of. Even if the media caught wind of our little expedition, we wouldn't be around to question. The government didn't want another Waco on its hands—not during an election year anyhow.

I gave Jorgenson every opportunity to mention a contact with her source in Ovid. That at least, would have given some justification to using SEALs. No mention was made, so when it looked like the briefing was about to finish up, I asked the question I had promised Kast I would pose. "Wouldn't it make sense for us to contact your source and clarify some of this data?" I asked innocently.

Her features clouded over, and I knew from her expression that there would be no contact with the mysterious source. "Our source," she began slowly, "has probably been compromised by now."

"Compromised?" I repeated. I wasn't going to let her off the hook easily.

"We suspect he has been discovered and possibly turned."

There was a collective groan around the table. I summed it up in words. "So odds are good they know we're coming."

"They probably know someone is coming," she amended. "That's why we're using you. It's possible you may have to fight your way out of Ovid."

"Without weapons?" Kast pointed out.

She scowled at him. "I thought SEALs were trained to live off the

land—to procure weapons from the enemy if necessary.”

She was right about that. Even Kast remained quiet for once.

“Our flight leaves within the hour,” she informed us. “Now let’s get your gear issued and get this show on the road.”

“What do you think, sir?” Doc asked as we were assembling our gear in preparation for the long flight to Oklahoma.

“I’m not paid to think,” I grunted noncommittally.

“Neither am I,” Doc agreed quietly, “but I watched you in there. You didn’t ask any questions to speak of, except the one about the contact, but you looked like you were chewing something over. You don’t think this mission is what she says it is, do you?”

I know in a lot of military units, Doc’s remarks would have been a little out of line, but we were SEALs, and that meant every member of the team was entitled to an opinion. The lowest rated man on the team might well bring up an overlooked fact that would save the entire team’s lives.

“You think she’s lying to us?” I asked Doc in a low tone.

He shrugged. “Maybe. I can see some rationale for using a SEAL Team. What bothers me is why us—I mean why specifically us? We’ve never worked together. Steele is an explosives expert on a recon mission. McCormick stands out like a sore thumb and is only good when it comes to lots of violence. Kast... well, Kast is about as dependable as an ice cube on a summer sidewalk.”

“I hear Hernandez is a good man,” I pointed out. “And you too, from what I hear.”

Doc nodded at the compliment. “I’ve heard good things about you too, sir.”

“Look, here’s what I want to do,” I told him quietly. “I suppose Jorgenson is right about one thing—six men milling around together would look a little suspicious. We’ll break into two teams as I planned. You take Steele and Hernandez. Try to learn as much as you can,

focusing on communications and logistics. I'll take McCormick and Kast. We'll verify key locations and try to find the best way out of Ovid."

"If the briefings are right, that might not be too easy without a fight."

"That's why I'm taking McCormick with me," I explained. "Without weapons, I may need somebody big enough to crack a few heads." I didn't bother to tell him that I also wanted to be sure he didn't crack any heads without my say-so.

"Makes sense," Doc allowed. "But what about Kast? You don't want to be saddled with him, do you?"

"No, but neither do you. Kast may be an eight ball, but he actually managed to ask a couple of good questions during the briefing. If it's as tough to get out of Ovid as the intel indicates, he may be insightful enough to figure out an exit."

Doc looked at me as if he didn't really believe I had any faith at all in Kast. Well, he was right—to a point. Kast could be insightful when he wanted to be. The problem was that he didn't always want to be. I wanted to be there to kick him personally in the ass if he started fucking up.

The flight to Oklahoma in a C-130 was long and noisy. All we could do after orders were issued and equipment checked was to sit back in the windowless cargo bay and close our eyes to shut out the red illumination overhead. Even though we'd have night-vision goggles for the jump, we'd have to be prepared to see as well as possible in the dark. The red light would help since it didn't impair night vision. The problem was it could also give me a splitting headache, so I kept my eyes closed, feigning sleep. Unfortunately, there was no easy way to shut out the drone of the plane's T56-A-T5 turboprops.

At least there was plenty of room to stretch out on the deck. The C-130 was built to hold about sixty-five paratroopers, so our small team, plus a jumpmaster and the Ice Queen with her two pet spooks made for plenty of personal space. Jorgenson pulled each of us aside, talking low to us in private. Apparently, she didn't completely trust my

skills in organizing the team. At least she seemed satisfied, and after an unusually long session with Steele, it was finally my turn.

“You’ve organized your men well, Lieutenant,” she admitted begrudgingly.

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

“Just remember—no rough stuff. Get in, get your information, and get out.”

“What happens once we’re out?” I asked.

She shrugged, drawing attention to her beautiful body. Even dressed as we were in a nondescript jump suit it was easy to see that she was undeniably stunning.

“After debrief, that will be none of your concern, Lieutenant,” spoiling the image of feminine perfection with her icy tone.

I returned the shrug. There was no use in discussing the subject further.

“Saddle up, men,” the jumpmaster called out. “You jump in fifteen minutes.”

We hooked up in a line, each man checking the man in front of him to make sure everything was in order. Jorgenson herself checked me over since I was last in line. The way she tested the straps made me realize she knew what she was doing. My limited esteem for her went up just a fraction of an inch.

Checking our chutes was of paramount importance—not just for our safety, but because of the nature of the parachute itself. GPS locators on our left wrists would pinpoint our precise location, making sure we could actually glide into the small fault in the bubble surrounding Ovid. Without any visual reference points and dropping at night, we would have no chance of reaching our target. The chutes themselves were of a highly-classified variety, connected to the GPS locator and designed to make midcourse corrections in our descent, adjusting our course far more accurately and quickly than even our expert manual adjustments.

The nature of the equipment for the drop meant we all knew Steele had a serious problem when he swore, “Fuck! My GPS is down.” Since the GPS was attached to the chute, everything would have to be replaced.

Jorgenson didn’t miss a beat. “Unhook,” she ordered. “Drop to the back of the line and I’ll have your spare chute ready.”

Steele moved quickly. We were seconds away from the drop. I looked around to make sure Jorgenson had him set up right. I had just turned back, satisfied, when the jumpmaster gave us the green light.

So I was now fifth in line. I watched with pride as each of my men dropped perfectly into the inky sky. Then it was my turn. I felt the rush of air, cool even in the late summer at this altitude over the warm, humid ground below. Night drops can be scary at first, but I had made dozens of them and found them exhilarating. I heard the tone and felt my chute slipping out of its case, stopping my free fall with an authoritative tug.

Looking below, I thought I could see at least one chute. Above, there was no sign of Steele but I wasn’t worried. The chutes would take us to pre-programmed landing spots about twenty yards apart. After a gentle float down into the moonless sky, our feet would touch ground in what the narrow rift in the satellite photos appeared to lead to a farm field. I only hoped the field would be something like wheat, gentle and forgiving instead of spiky corn stalks. Well, whatever lay below wouldn’t be enough to hurt us through the jump suits. Besides, once we were through the rift, the locator would surrender minor control to us so we could avoid any unknown obstacles.

Passing through the rift was anticlimactic. If it hadn’t been for the altimeter in the locator, we would never have known we had passed through it. Or at least we wouldn’t have known until we looked down. Off in the distance, just beyond our drop zone, lay the lights of a town. It didn’t look like a big place, but I knew it hadn’t been there moments ago.

I think until that very moment, I had wondered if we weren’t on some

sort of a government sponsored snipe hunt. It was still hard to believe that a town could be so completely hidden from view. The technology behind such a trick had me wondering if maybe Jorgenson wasn't right about this being the work of aliens. Not for the first time since we had been ordered to this mission, I wished that we had come armed with more than a few paltry knives. Whoever—or whatever—could do this wasn't going to be afraid of the most fearsome knife. They might not even be afraid of anything in our standard arsenal.

There was no time to dwell upon that now. As I switched on my night-vision goggles, I could see the ground was rushing up more quickly now, and the field that was to be our landing zone was surrounded by some rather large trees. Deftly, I pulled to the right just enough to avoid all of them and proudly saw that I was heading straight for the center of the field.

I stayed on my feet, running until I could pull enough of the chute down to stop myself. We had lucked out. The field we had landed in appeared to be beans of some sort—probably soybeans I realized. Other than a little incidental damage to a few of the plants, no one would even know we had been there.

I could see two other figures, their bright silhouettes in stark contrast to the darkness behind them as they gathered up their chutes for burial. As I began to do the same to my own chute, I could see two more approaching. One was so large he could only be McCormick.

“We’ve got everybody now except Steele,” Doc reported to my right.

“He should have been right behind me,” I returned.

“Maybe he missed the drop zone,” Doc suggested.

It was a distinct possibility, especially if Jorgenson didn't get his chute on in time. “What was he carrying?” I asked.

Doc shrugged. “Everything he had is redundant. He had a video camera and some listening devices. He also had an uplink, but we’ve got two others.”

That was one good thing about not having to carry weapons on this

mission. We each carried enough electronic gear to open a *Radio Shack*. What we were missing was another pair of eyes. I thought about giving Kast or McCormick to Doc, but I finally decided that Doc and Hernandez would make an effective team.

“We’re about two clicks out of Ovid,” Hernandez announced. “It’ll be light in a couple of hours.”

“Then let’s get moving,” I ordered. “Get these chutes and jumpsuits in the ground. Save the goggles, though. They might come in handy.”

Shortly, each of us had buried our gear and completed our disguises. The equipment we had been issued was as compact as technology would allow, but it still took up space. Kast and Hernandez had been issued tool bags so they looked as if they were blue-collar workers. Doc and I had briefcases which were light but designed to carry a lot of gear. We were the white-collar workers. McCormick carried his gear in a gym bag, looking as if he were on his way to work out.

There was still no sign of Steele, but I decided we couldn’t wait any longer to move out.

Doc and Hernandez started out first. We gave them about twenty minutes—enough time to get to the edge of town. Then we took off in a slightly different direction—one that would bring us out very close to City Hall.

The sun was just coming up as we reached the first houses in the town proper. What I saw reminded me of my hometown back in Ohio. Ovid was a farming community, judging from a sign advertising a feed and grain store and an official sign reading ‘Future Farmers of America welcomes you to Ovid.’ I had always thought of Oklahoma as dry and arid, but the tree-lined streets and lush green lawns were reminiscent of my home state.

The only noticeable difference was that Ovid looked maybe just a little bit... cleaner than my hometown—and a little more prosperous. I knew from the briefing material that Ovid boasted some industry—most notably Vulman Industries. That must have made the NSA cringe. Vulman held a lot of top secret government contracts. What if the

company was really controlled by enemies of the United States?

“So far, so good,” McCormick muttered.

“Yeah. It reminds me of home,” I commented.

The big black man shook his head. “Not me. I grew up in Chicago—South Side.”

“Chicago?” Kast said. “So did I.”

“North Shore, right?” McCormick growled.

Reluctantly, Kast nodded.

“It figures,” McCormick snorted.

“You guys can discuss Chicago later,” I told them. “Right now, let’s discuss Ovid.”

“What’s to discuss?” McCormick wanted to know. “We’re almost to Main Street and all I’ve seen are houses out of Smallville.”

“You were expecting maybe Roman temples?” Kast chuckled. Then the chuckling stopped.

Since it was so early in the morning, we had seen very few people out walking around. But as the sun rose and the residents of Ovid began stirring, we noticed an occasional morning runner or a homeowner in his bathrobe out to retrieve the morning paper. But it was a man in jeans and a denim shirt—probably a construction worker from the tool belt he wore—walking to his truck who made us realize suddenly that there was something very strange going on in Ovid.

The man smiled and waved at us. Dumbfounded, we managed to return the greeting as he stepped into his truck and started it up.

“You could see right through him,” McCormick muttered.

That wasn’t exactly true. It wasn’t as if he was actually transparent. Rather, it was as if we could ‘sense’ what was being blocked by his body, as if we were seeing two images at once somehow double-exposed.

“A shade,” Kast commented, his eyes glued on the strange

manifestation. “They’re real.”

And if the shades were real, that meant...

McCormick stated it for all of us. “Then maybe there really are gods.” Raised a casual Lutheran in a small Ohio town, the thought that the Roman gods might be real was a blow to everything I had been taught to believe. McCormick and Kast appeared equally disturbed. No wonder our superiors wanted to believe aliens controlled Ovid. It was far more palatable than the alternative.

“Come on,” I finally managed. “We’ve got work to do.”

We had studied the material on Ovid for so long that Main Street felt like home to us. We could have probably named more stores and who ran them than many of Ovid’s residents. And unlike most of the residents, we had a pretty good idea who really ran some of those stores.

“The street is pretty wide,” McCormick remarked. “It would be hard to defend.”

My SEAL mind tried to picture barricades made up of wrecked cars and shop fixtures behind which the gods tried to hold off advancing platoons of Marines. “You’re right,” I acknowledged. “Everything is too open.” And too... right, I realized. Ovid looked like what America was supposed to be all about—small towns filled with friendly, prosperous people. After what all of us had seen around the world, Ovid looked like the last place any red-blooded American Marine would want to damage.

“The material said City Hall is where this judge and his people can be found,” Kast offered. “Maybe it’s the only defensible point in town.”

It sounded like a good guess. “Okay,” I agreed. “We’ll go there next.”

We were fish out of water, and we were just really beginning to realize it. While we had protested that we weren’t the right people for the job, deep down, every SEAL thinks he can do anything and everything if he has to. There was never any question in our minds that we could quickly penetrate the town, assess any threats, and make our way out

without casualties.

But what we had found was a town as American as any town we had ever seen. Flags flew, birds sang, and people looked prosperous and happy, unlike the disintegrating pest holes that were usually assigned to. There were no sullen men ready to ambush us from narrow streets and alleys. There were no burned out and bombed out husks of buildings, booby trapped and waiting for an unwary enemy. There were no command posts, fortified areas, or communications arrays which needed to be discovered and neutralized.

“There’s City Hall,” Kast nodded.

Again, there was nothing particularly ominous about the place. Stately columns and a gray marble façade were set off by a grassy lawn painstakingly manicured and accented with flowers of every imaginable variety.

“I wish my hometown looked this good,” I muttered.

“Look!” McCormick said suddenly. We were still half a block from the entrance to City Hall, but we were close enough to see something disturbing. Two men were just getting out of a police car. The police officer, a tall, serious-looking individual wearing mirrored sunglasses, was ushering the two men up the front stairs.

“It’s Doc and Hernandez!” Kast gasped.

Strangely, no weapon was trained on them—yet they offered absolutely no resistance. Either Doc or Hernandez should have been more than a match for any policeman, except...

“Wasn’t there something in the briefing about a cop being one of the gods?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Kast replied. “Mercury is supposed to be a cop here—an Officer Mercer.”

“Well, it didn’t take him long to find our guys,” McCormick commented. “Shall we get them loose?”

“Those aren’t our orders,” I reminded him. “If we identify ourselves,

our usefulness will be compromised.”

“If they talk, it will be compromised anyway,” Kast pointed out.

McCormick and I just stared at him. The thought of any SEAL ratting out another member of the team was unacceptable. It concerned me, though. If that was the way Kast thought, then maybe he might sell us out if he had the chance.

So we waited impatiently outside City Hall, taking turns walking around so long as at least one of us had an eye on the City Hall door. While we saw several people coming and going, there was no sign of the police officer or either of our comrades. Of course, I realized, if this judge really was a god—or alien—who had the power to transform humans, we might not recognize our team members anyhow. But even after seeing the semi-transparent shade, I found it hard to believe that a person could be transformed—magically or otherwise—into an entirely different person. However, my skepticism was soon to be challenged.

I was the closest man to the entrance when I saw Officer Mercer leaving the building, escorting two young girls who looked between twelve and fourteen. Both were slim and attractive with light brown hair hanging loosely about their shoulders. Both were wearing the tight-fitting jeans and tank tops favored by young girls everywhere. The only difference in their clothing was that one wore a white tank top and the other a blue one.

If Officer Mercer hadn’t been with them, I probably would not have given them a second look. Attractive as they were, they were obviously jailbait, and besides, I had a job to do, looking for my comrades. Still, the hairs on the back of my neck rose up. What if this judge really did have the power to transform them? How would I know it was them?

I was soon to find out.

One of the girls—the one with the white top—seemed relaxed and natural, laughing and squeezing her friend’s arm as girls often do. The other one though, was ignoring her, looking around as if searching for

something—or someone. Her eyes lit on me and stayed there. She gave a sudden, subtle hand motion which would be missed by anyone who was not in the military. She was telling me she had been hit.

At first, I refused to believe what my eyes were telling me. Were the two girls really Doc and Hernandez? If so, one had apparently been mind-wiped. The girl in the white top showed no distress or interest in anything which would not be noticed by a young teen girl. The other one though, had apparently retained her mind and was trying to signal me. Carefully, I acknowledged her signal with my own hand, and she nodded with satisfaction as she climbed into Officer Mercer's patrol car.

But which one had survived? I felt that whichever one no longer remembered who she had been constituted a fatality. According to our informant, a majority of Ovid's real residents fell into that category. Perhaps their souls—if you believed in that sort of thing—retained a modicum of the original identity, but the victim would live out the rest of his or her life with no recollection of any previous existence. I shuddered at the thought.

"What's going on?" McCormick had circled back around to my position. Rather than answer, I started walking in the direction I had seen Kast last. He was only a hundred yards or so away.

When we were all together, I told them what I had seen.

"Then it's real," Kast murmured.

"It's real all right," I agreed.

"We've got to get them," McCormick urged. "They're still members of the team."

I shook my head. "No, they're not. First of all, one of them wouldn't think she was being rescued. She'd probably think we were kidnappers. And as for the other one... well, I have no idea where Officer Mercer took her. She's probably on her way 'home' right now to meet her new parents—not that they'll realize they're meeting her. If we try to take her, assuming we could even find her, her parents will

have the authorities on us.”

“So it’s one captured and one dead,” Kast summed up.

I nodded. “Remember men, we have a mission to accomplish. It’s the same as Afghanistan: the mission comes first.”

I looked in their eyes to make sure they were on board with that thought. Kast nodded at once, although there was an odd look on his face, as if he was thinking about something besides the mission or our casualties. McCormick nodded reluctantly, but he was a good SEAL: he knew how to take orders.

“All right,” I sighed. “Now, whatever is going on around here seems to center on City Hall. I think we should all take a look around.”

“What if we’re spotted?” McCormick asked.

“Tell them you’re looking for the head—only remember to call it ‘the men’s room.’ Then stay in the head a few minutes and start searching again. Look for anything that looks like a nerve center—communications, defenses, and so on. We’ll meet back right here in one hour. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!” they said in unison. I smiled as they walked away. In spite of my misgivings, both McCormick and Kast were turning out to be pretty good men.

Our search proved easier than I would have thought. There seemed to be little security in the building. Instead, it looked like the typical small town city hall on a warm, late summer afternoon. That isn’t to say doors weren’t locked—some were, but they appeared to be storage areas or utility closets. There was nothing which might be thought of as a command center or defensive stronghold.

As I made my way through the building, I noticed a large number of the shades. As nearly as I could tell, everyone who was real just treated them as if they were normal people. All were uniformly well dressed, looking far more prosperous than I would have imagined them to be. Back where I grew up in Ohio, there were such people, of course, but not as many. According to the briefings, Ovid was an

agricultural community with a small but growing manufacturing segment. Could it be that Vulman Industries was doing so well that the entire town was prospering?

The only evidence I saw of any official security was the presence of the local police department, but even there, it seemed as if things were laid back. The only officer on duty was a very, very attractive black woman. Behind the glass at the information window, I could see her concentrating on some paperwork. She didn't notice me, so I was pretty sure she wasn't on guard duty. If she were, she was doing a damn poor job of it.

We met back on the street as scheduled and compared stories. Both McCormick and Kast reported the same things I had seen—average Americans going about their daily business. No one had seen anything suspicious or threatening.

"I think it's some sort of bullshit," McCormick growled.

"Don't forget the shades," Kast cautioned. "They certainly aren't bullshit. And neither is what happened to Doc and Hernandez."

"It's possible that City Hall is just a front," I theorized. "Maybe the real shots are called from someplace like Vulman Industries."

McCormick shook his head. "Maybe you're right, but there's no way we'll get in there. A defense plant like that has to be pretty secure."

"What do they make?" Kast asked casually.

"Auto parts for Fords, mostly," McCormick told him. "But they also have a military division that makes fuel pumps for aircraft that extends their range."

I looked at McCormick curiously, surprised that he knew so much about Vulman Industries. That hadn't been in the briefings. He shrugged and explained, "I'm a stockholder."

"Wait a minute," Kast said. "You mean you knew about Ovid before we got here?"

McCormick shook his head. "Nope. According to the annual report, the

company is headquartered someplace else—Oklahoma City, I think. I don't remember any mention of Ovid."

"Well, no matter what's at that plant, I doubt if we'd have any chance of getting in," I decided. "I don't think we're going to be able to accomplish anything on our own without weapons." I silently cursed Jorgenson and her civilian staff who had sent us in with no means to defend ourselves. "If we report back, we may be able to persuade our people to send in an armed force and extract our... men. Let's go ahead and see if we can get out of this town and report in. Figuring out an exit is the last part of our assignment."

I got no argument from either of the men. They were as ready as I was to get out of Ovid before something happened to us like what had happened to Doc and Hernandez. As SEALs, we faced death throughout our careers without flinching, but the thought of being changed into teenage girls as Doc and Hernandez had been was enough to make any SEAL cut and run. After all, as girls, we could never be SEALs.

The sun was setting as we reached the outskirts of town. We had stopped off at a convenience store and bought sandwiches and drinks as it had been a long time since our last meal. We made short work of them in a pleasant park called Sooner Park, sitting under a large oak tree that seemed to sigh in the warm summer breezes.

Kast looked a little unnerved as he finished the last of his meal. He kept looking up at the tree.

"Something wrong Kast?" I asked.

He tried to shrug it off. "It's just this damn tree," he explained. "I keep thinking it's watching me—trying to talk to me."

"That's weird," McCormick commented, swallowing half a bag of chips right after he shoved them in with a large, greasy hand.

"In Ovid, everything's weird," Kast muttered.

"Then let's get out of here," I ordered, pulling myself up off the ground. I didn't want to admit it, but I had noticed something weird about the

tree, too. Could it be that the tree had once been human, too? It wasn't outside the realm of possibility. I remembered an old myth or two where the gods turned someone into a tree or a flower. Maybe Doc and Hernandez had gotten off lightly, just being changed into girls, if having one's sex changed could ever be called light.

As we walked silently out of town, choosing to cross a field rather than staying on a road, I thought more about that. Like most men, the thought of being changed into a woman was about the worst thing I could imagine. The thought of wearing dresses and makeup and having periods and babies was bad enough, but the real problem was that being a woman meant not being a SEAL. In an age in which women military personnel were 'manning' everything from ships to attack fighters, no woman had ever (or hopefully ever would be) a SEAL. It was a bastion of male superiority, where testosterone ruled and estrogen was only good for a one-night stand.

At least that was what most SEALs thought—whether they would admit it or not was another issue. Of course some SEALs married and had nice families, but many didn't. I had tried it once, marrying a girl I met while stationed in San Diego, but it hadn't worked out. Jennifer was a good woman, but three years with me were three hard years. The divorce was amicable—or at least as amicable as divorces ever are—with no children to muddy the waters. I hadn't seen her in four years, ever since the decree had become final.

Being a SEAL was just too damned hard on a marriage. It was nearly impossible for most men to plunge into the rugged mountains of Afghanistan slitting the throats of enemies and blowing up their bases one day, then bouncing a happy innocent child and hugging a sweet, sensitive wife the next.

"Any sign of a barrier?" I asked after we had walked a couple of miles in the evening dusk.

"Nothing," McCormick replied, looking through a small scope he had produced from his gym bag.

We had nearly crested a hill which would block our view of Ovid at

last. If there was a barrier, it had to be close. We were already four or five miles out of town.

Kast spotted the lights first. "There's a town over there!" Sure enough, spread out before us were the lights of a town, twinkling in the still summer evening air.

"Shit! It's Ovid," McCormick growled scoping out the town with night glasses.

I felt my heart sink. "Then the briefing was accurate," I murmured. "We have to find another way out of town."

McCormick pocketed the glasses. "Don't worry, sir. We all knew it might be like this. I'm fine with it if we need to fight our way out of here."

In spite of myself, I smiled at McCormick. His first impulse was always to fight. Well, at least he had obeyed orders thus far. He had been a good man to have on the mission: he had kept his natural impulses to fight in full check. But maybe it was time to fight now. "And I think I have a way to do it," I said.

We were a little stiff and hungry the next morning as we set out to execute my plan. We had spent the night under the stars, sleeping surrounded by a clump of bushes to hide us from curious eyes. Breakfast had been cold and basic, consisting of high-energy rations we carried with us, washed down by water. I would have killed for a cup of coffee. With a SEAL, that isn't always an idle statement.

The plan was simple enough. We were going to steal a car and head out of town. Of course, we knew we would just end up back on the other side of the 'bubble' which contained Ovid, but escape in the stolen car was not our objective. According to the briefings, this mysterious judge liked to try his victims in a sham of a traffic court. The victims were hauled in by Officer Mercer and placed before the court where they were inevitably transformed. We were counting on Officer Mercer's efficiency. He would be made to think he was

pursuing a single suspect. When he approached the car though, he would find out there were three of us. I doubted if even a so-called god could best three highly trained SEALs.

Stealing a car was easy enough. Like many small towns, most people didn't even bother to lock their car doors when they stopped off for something—like breakfast. Ignoring the wonderful greasy smells wafting out of the little hole in the wall called *Nellie's Grill*, we picked a rugged-looking GMC Yukon and had it turning over in seconds. I had a sneaky feeling from the efficiency of McCormick's work that he had picked up the trick on the South Side of Chicago rather than in SEAL training at Coronado.

Kast and I were hunkered down in the back seat, knives at the ready as McCormick screamed out of Ovid as if he were in NASCAR time trials. With grim satisfaction, I could hear the approaching whoop of a police siren. "Is he alone?" I called out to McCormick.

"Seems so," the big man replied, glancing in the rear-view mirror. "Get ready: he's almost on us."

We barely had time to brace before McCormick slammed on the brakes just seconds after we heard the siren go around us and apparently stop in front of us. I looked Kast in the eye, satisfied that he was waiting with grim determination.

By all rights, the trick should have worked. I had used variations of it in three different countries. It would have worked in Ovid, too, if it wasn't for Officer Mercer. As expected, he got out of his patrol car and sauntered over to our car. I could tell from the sound of his footsteps approaching in the loose gravel: I had heard the sound before. After all, he was the authority—he was the cop. Even if he had his holster unstrapped (as any competent cop would have), he would have no reason to believe that there were two men, armed with knives and experts at hand-to-hand combat, waiting for him in the back seat.

In a moment, we would swing the door open, catching him off balance. Then McCormick would open the front door, knocking him to the ground. Dazed and on his back, he would have two knives at his

throat before his heart could beat twice. With him as a hostage, he'd escort us out of Ovid where we would be able to report in and complete our mission. Then the brass in Washington could figure out what the next move should be. The plan went wrong from the get-go. Certain that he was close enough to nail with the door, I threw it open, surprised when it hit only air. I heard McCormick's door open before I could get on my feet, but instead of finding Officer Mercer lying stunned on the ground, I found McCormick there, trying to catch his breath. Kast was right behind me, and I was startled to hear him yelp as something shot past me. I heard his knife go skittering across the top of the car, landing with a dull thud some distance away.

There was no time to think. We had underestimated our foe, and only blind luck could save us now. Officer Mercer was moving too fast to see, so I made a wild wide swing in the hopes of at least disabling him. Luck wasn't with me. In retrospect, it couldn't have been. Unless I had been able to move and think as quickly as Officer Mercer, he could have avoided any thrust I made. I grunted as my wrist was suddenly jerked, causing my own blade to go flying. An instant later, Officer Mercer was standing there a few feet from us, gun drawn. He wasn't even breathing hard.

I still wasn't willing to concede that the masters of Ovid were gods, but I was more than willing to admit that Officer Mercer would have made one hell of a SEAL.

As we all regained our wits, Officer Mercer surprised us by putting the gun away, a grim smile on his lips. None of us made a move toward him, though. Any attack would have been futile. Even McCormick, as aggressive as he was, knew better than to challenge this... whatever he was.

"In the car, please," Officer Mercer ordered emotionlessly, nodding toward the back seat of his patrol car. Meekly, we obeyed.

None of us spoke on the way back into town. Unlike most of the people Officer Mercer must have detained over the years, we knew we weren't on our way to traffic court where a hefty fine and points off our licenses would be the order of the day. If the course of events ran

as we had been told in the briefings, we would soon be on trial for auto theft and assaulting a police officer. Then, this mysterious judge would utter a few words that sounded vaguely like Latin and we would all find ourselves in strange bodies with tailor-made lives awaiting us.

So what sort of a life would I be condemned to? That was what was on my mind. And would I remember who I had been? Apparently many did not. To lose one's identity in such a way was tantamount to a death sentence in my book. Still, it might be preferable to some of the things this judge might decide to turn us into.

It looked as if Doc and Hernandez had been changed into young girls. I assumed one of them remembered who she had been before and the other one didn't. But which was which? Would we all be young girls just like them? It seemed a fate even worse than death. It wasn't that I had anything against girls, really. Like all red-blooded American boys, I liked girls just fine. I just didn't want to be one. Besides, even worse than having periods and wearing skirts and makeup, girls couldn't be SEALs.

I expected to be led directly to the courtroom, and my expectations were met—sort of. The courtroom was empty, and Officer Mercer led us to the front of the room through a door which I was sure led to the judge's chambers. I felt a strange sense of relief at this. According to the briefing material, this judge always made the transformations in the courtroom. Perhaps we were to be spared. Or perhaps not.

I thought seriously about trying to make a break for it, but I doubted if it would do any good. Officer Mercer had defeated all three of us, and we had possessed weapons then. And who could possibly outrun him anyway? Besides, there was something in my mind that seemed to be pushing me to cooperate. Had others felt this in the past? No mention had been made of it. Was it possible that Officer Mercer was using some subtle form of mind control? It would explain how one being—no matter how powerful—could keep several people under control at once.

At least we would at last meet the infamous judge. I had tried to conjure up a mental picture of him since no description had been given to us. It was hard for me to imagine the leader of the Roman

gods as a judge. Every picture I had ever seen of Jupiter showed him as a powerful but older man, usually with gray hair and a gray beard, trimmed in either Greek or Roman fashion. Instead, I pictured him on the bench as an elderly, corpulent presence, with a dour expression and daunting manner.

Given such an image, I was very surprised by The Judge when I met him. He had surrounded himself with an office which managed to be comfortable, official, and masculine all at the same time. Green leather chairs were arranged neatly in front of a large oak desk. The desk was framed with the flags of the United States and the State of Oklahoma, giving it the look of normalcy which set us somewhat at ease. His office looked like anyone would expect an American magistrate's office to look like. I suppose I had been half-expecting something out of a Roman temple, complete with oil lamps and glaring statues.

Standing before the desk was a man of middle years wearing a tasteful dark blue suit of an expensive cut, accented with a blue oxford shirt and fashionable red and blue patterned tie. He was well built, just as all the statues and drawings of Jupiter indicated, but his dark hair and beard, salted with just a distinguished amount of gray, and his gold-rimmed glasses made him look mortal—but still imposing. He stood an inch or two above my six-one stature, making him tall but not as tall as McCormick.

"Welcome to Ovid," he said in a deep, rich voice, extending his hand.

I shook it. His hand felt warm and normal—his handshake firm but not uncomfortably so. He smiled as he locked onto my eyes with his steel blue ones. Then he repeated the ritual with Kast and McCormick.

"Please be seated, gentlemen," he offered, motioning to the chair before his desk as he took his own seat. "Would you care for coffee? My secretary would usually get some for you, but she is out of town for a few days. However, I'm sure we can manage some coffee for you."

We looked at each other, unsure as to what to make of all of this. Each of us then nodded slowly, surprised as Officer Mercer produced

a tray with three steaming cups which he offered to each of us. We hadn't seen him leave the room or return, but there he was with our coffee.

"Could I get some cre..." McCormick began before looking into his cup, already lightened with cream.

"I think you'll find it to your liking, gentlemen," The Judge told us. "Two spoons of sugar for you, Petty Officer Kast, and cream and sugar for you, Petty Officer McCormick. As for you, Lieutenant Harmon, just black coffee, although it is your favorite Kona blend."

"Nice trick," I commented, sipping the coffee. Maybe I should have worried about the beverage being drugged, but I figured if he wanted to shoot us up with something to make us talk, Officer Mercer could slip us a needle before we ever saw it coming.

"It's not really a trick," The Judge said with a pleasant smile. "It's all here." He pointed at three files on his desk. "Everything about your lives is here," he went on. "Your history, your preferences, your hopes, your fears, your weaknesses—all here."

"The files don't look very thick," McCormick noticed.

"The print is quite small," The Judge replied cryptically.

"Okay," I said bluntly. "Now that we've all made nice, what is it you want of us?"

The Judge looked at me carefully, and although there was no malice in his gaze, I couldn't help being reminded of the way a small boy studies an insect. To say it was an uncomfortable stare would be an understatement. At last he nodded, "Very well, Lieutenant, I'll get right to the point. I want some information from you."

I remained silent. In the movies, this would be the place where I'd defiantly spout out my name, rank and serial number. That didn't seem like a good idea right at that moment. Besides, it wasn't really SOP and hadn't been for years. The Code of Conduct for prisoners of war merely states that such information can be given, but not that it has to be given. More important is the concept of evading further

questions to the best of one's ability. That I fully intended to do.

"I want to know about Admiral Nepper," he announced.

I was somewhat surprised by the request. I decided it wouldn't hurt to answer him on this one. "He's in Naval Intelligence," I told him, "but I suspect you already know that."

"And did he assign you to this mission?"

"Can't you just read our minds?" I returned.

The Judge frowned. "Normally, yes," he replied honestly. "But something seems to be blocking us. Now, did Admiral Nepper assign you to this mission?"

"I don't know Admiral Nepper," I replied honestly.

While there was no surprise in his expression, there was something else... it was as if I had confirmed his suspicions. I hadn't intended to do that.

"Then who did you get your orders from?" he demanded.

I remained silent.

"Where is Petty Officer Steele?" Now it was my turn to attempt to hide my expression of surprise. How did he know about Steele? Of course he knew about Steele, I realized. He probably had a file on him as well. I remained silent, though, not wanting to even acknowledge that Steele existed.

The Judge relaxed in his chair, studying each of our faces. "Since you won't give me any information, perhaps I should give you some. Admiral Nepper selected each of you for this mission. It was to be his mission to supervise, but for some reason he was removed from the assignment. Do you know why he selected each of you?"

We all remained silent, but of course, we really wanted the answer to that question. As luck would have it, the answer was forthcoming.

The Judge pulled out another file, distributing a copy of a newspaper clipping to each of us. I looked at mine. It was an article from my

hometown paper back in Ohio: 'Local Man Killed in Afghanistan' the headline blared. Of course, the picture was of me. Looking at McCormick and Kast, I could tell from their expressions that they had received similar news about themselves.

"Any novelty store can do this," I commented tossing the disturbing article on his desk.

The Judge actually smiled at that. "Yes, but you know this is not the work of a novelty shop, don't you, Lieutenant?"

I remained silent. He was right, of course. I don't know how I knew: I just knew. And looking at the others, I could see I wasn't alone.

"Because of your knowledge of Ovid," The Judge continued, "I believe we can dispense with the necessity of a formal trial. I would rather settle all of this out of court. Here is what I'm offering you. If you won't answer my questions, you will be transformed into citizens of Ovid at my whim. You may even lose your mental identities, resulting in what some have likened to a death sentence. In fact, the odds are fairly high that this will be the result."

I thought again of Doc and Hernandez, where one of them almost certainly had suffered such a fate.

"On the other hand, should any one of you choose to cooperate, I will agree to change each of you into a citizen of Ovid using the least invasive method I can think of. You will be able to keep your present identities and we will even find suitable jobs for you."

"I suppose getting out of Ovid as we are isn't an option," McCormick muttered.

"I'm afraid not," The Judge sighed. Then, he turned his gaze intently on McCormick. "Well, Petty Officer McCormick? This is your last chance. Will you tell me what I want to know?"

"Go fuck yourself," McCormick said so calmly I could only smile in respect.

The Judge waved his right hand at McCormick while uttering a something that sounded sort of like Latin. Kast and I stood transfixed

as McCormick began to shimmer and change. It was almost like watching an old television set where the picture goes out of focus and skews. McCormick appeared to be in a trance, his eyes rolling back into his head as his body lightened and shrank. His clothes were changing as well, his huge tennis shoes becoming black and shiny as his shirt and trousers lightened, becoming a soft pink.

All in all, the transformation took less than a minute. Where once a giant of a man had stood, there was now a small, fragile-looking girl—white with long medium blonde hair arranged so that she looked a little like Alice in Wonderland. Her dress was as feminine as feminine could be, with matching pink socks and little black Mary Jane shoes.

“Who am I?” the little girl cried out, tears forming at the corners of her eyes. “What have you done to me?”

“Your name is Michelle Darling,” The Judge told her, a wicked little smile on his lips. “You’re five years old and will be starting kindergarten right away.”

“I’m not a little girl! Change me back!” Her voice was becoming nearly hysterical. In spite of what it would have meant, I was almost wishing that she had been deprived of her memories. What she had become was as opposite of her former self as anyone could be. I realized with deep concern that a similar fate probably awaited Kast and me.

There was a knock at the door. Officer Mercer opened it, admitting a distraught-looking woman—one of the shades. When she spotted the little girl, she sighed in relief. “Oh, Michelle baby, how could you have wandered off like that?”

“I’m not Michelle!” the new girl cried.

The woman ignored her. “Oh honey, you can’t run off like that. What if you’d been hit by a car?” She rushed to the little girl and hugged her tightly as she knelt, muffling the youngster’s protests with her breasts. Holding the girl as if she would never let go, the woman looked up at The Judge. “I’m sorry, your honor. I was shopping at March’s and she wandered away. I really try to be a good mother.”

The Judge nodded sympathetically, playing his own part to the hilt. “I know you are, Mrs. Darling. Michelle has always been a handful, especially with her imagination. Why, she tried to tell us she wasn’t really Michelle.”

Mrs. Darling nodded with understanding. “I don’t know where she came up with that game. Raymond and I thought it was cute at first, but lately she’s been playing it way too much. We... we’ve been thinking about getting professional help for her.”

The Judge shook his head. “I don’t think that will be necessary. She’s just adjusting to her identity. A lot of children go through that, you know.”

Mrs. Darling smiled, picking up the little girl who had nearly exhausted herself in tears. “Thank you for understanding, your honor.”

The Judge smiled. “Any time, Mrs. Darling. Say hello to Raymond for me.”

She smiled happily and left as Officer Mercer closed the door behind her.

“Now who is next?” The Judge asked. “How about you, Petty Officer Kast?”

I expected Kast to fold. Sure, he had been good on the mission—better than I had expected—but his record spoke for itself. He would cave in: I was sure of it. He wasn’t even a career SEAL. He had a good life waiting for him when his hitch was up. He’d fold. He had to.

He didn’t.

His eyes darted back and forth for a few moments, as if he was trying to think of what to do. At last, he replied softly, “I have nothing to say.”

The Judge raised an eyebrow. I think he, too, was a little surprised. “Are you sure?” he asked Kast quietly.

Kast shifted nervously.

“It might not be quite what you envisioned,” he said cryptically.

“I’ll take my chances,” Kast replied evenly, but I could tell something about his decision was bothering him.

“Last chance,” The Judge prompted.

“Just do it!”

Kast began to change, but not exactly like McCormick had changed. Instead, while he grew shorter, he was still about five feet tall. His hair had become black as night and thick, long and straight. His features were changing, becoming more feminine while his skin took on a coppery tone. His clothing changed as well, becoming a black tank top and a black miniskirt. Instead of heavy shoes, he now sported worn, cheap sandals open at the toe where small brown toes peeked out covered in chipped pink polish.

The girl he had become was thin with small breasts and fairly narrow hips. She appeared to be in her teens, but where in her teens was indeterminate. Her clothing was rather worn, looking as if it had seen years of wear, perhaps from an older sister. While not unattractive, the girl looked as if she came from a financially disadvantaged family, where there simply wasn’t enough money to provide her with the things that made girls look their best.

“You are Maria Lone Feather,” The Judge told her. “You are fourteen, living here in town with your aunt since your parents decided Ovid schools would be preferable to the reservation schools.”

Kast looked down at herself, studying the cheap jewelry and worn clothing that were now hers. “Can I go now?” she asked softly.

The Judge handed her a card. “Yes, you may go. This card will direct you to your aunt’s trailer. Your life will be a hard one.”

For someone like Kast, raised in an affluent home, the change of race and financial status might have been more difficult than the change of sex. Still, he seemed to accept the burden without protest. Before he left, he looked back at me and mouthed, “Good luck.”

I nodded in respect. I hoped that I could accept whatever The Judge had in store for me as well as Kast had.

“So it comes down to you, Lieutenant,” The Judge said, turning his full attention to me. He glanced down at his file. “You’ve led an interesting life, Lieutenant.”

He was going to work on me, I realized. He had wanted me to be the one to break all along. Of course, I was the officer in charge. I presumably knew more than any of my men about the mission. I was potentially the best source of information. He had made me watch as he impatiently transformed two of my men, giving them lives which would be sheer hell for them. McCormick would be weak and tiny and raised to be highly feminine. Kast would find his life of privilege a thing of the past, living out an existence in borderline poverty. As for me... well, he had to have something even worse planned for me, I thought.

But I had been trained to withstand interrogation. Granted, my superiors had never anticipated the threat of transformation, but I was sure this tin-pot god, or whatever he was, couldn’t break me—even if he planned to change me into a female.

Of course, like any normal man, I had no desire to be a woman. Womanhood offered me nothing and took away from me the one thing I lived for—the opportunity to be a SEAL. But if I had been blinded in an explosion on a mission, or lost a leg to a land mine, wouldn’t I be equally deprived of the opportunity to be a SEAL? I had to look at my situation just like that—my transformation would be like a serious wound. I would not break.

That was what I told myself over and over as The Judge looked through my file. “You had a rather hard childhood according to this,” he commented. “Your father was an alcoholic—he beat your mother severely on many occasions. You were an only child.”

I remained quiet, just sitting in the comfortable chair and glaring at him. There was nothing to say. The Judge was probing, looking for something which might get a rise out of me. I wasn’t going to give it to him.

“Did you know, Lieutenant, that the reason you were an only child is the beating your mother received from him when you were only three

damaged her so badly that the doctors were forced to perform a hysterectomy?"

I hadn't known it. I was sure my mother covered for my father that time, just like she always covered for him. She made excuses for him until the day he died in an accident at the steel mill where he worked. I loved my mother and despised my father, but I never had any respect for my mother. The way she put up with the beatings was unconscionable. She could have made him stop, just like I did when I managed to knock him out when I was only twelve. But she was too weak-willed to make him stop—just like many women I knew.

For someone who couldn't read my thoughts, The Judge seemed to know exactly what I was thinking. "You showed remarkable courage when you stopped him from beating you."

"I surprised him," I replied. "He didn't expect me to have that frying pan in my hand. I knocked him out cold, and he had been so drunk, he didn't remember it the next day. But he must have sensed something, because he never went after me again."

"But he continued to abuse your mother," he pointed out.

"She wouldn't tell him to stop," I said simply. Fortunately, it wasn't a long-term problem. He died in that accident just three months later. If he had lived, I would have probably had to kill him before he could kill my mother. As it was, she wasn't very healthy for the remainder of her life, dying in her late forties, right after I graduated from the Academy.

"Yet you never abused your wife," The Judge mused.

"I'm not my father," I replied simply. I knew where he was going with that. Many abused boys become abusers themselves: it's all they know. I had made a vow to myself as I watched my father being lowered into the ground that I would never be like him. I would work hard and study hard, staying out of the mills and making the most of my opportunities. I had done just that—top ten percent of my high school graduating class, All-State in high school football, good grades at the Academy, coupled with an outstanding collegiate football career, and finally the SEALs where I was tested every day.

“No you’re not,” The Judge said quietly. “Lieutenant Harmon, you’ve wanted your entire life to prove yourself. Given your family background, you’ve done that very well. What if I were to tell you that by giving me the information I need, you’d be doing a great service for your country and your race?”

I hadn’t expected that. My eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

The Judge looked at me evenly. “I would ask you to accept for a moment the idea that my associates and I have access to something that will allow us to see the future. Can you accept that?”

“Yes,” I replied, and I meant it. Any beings who could shut an entire town off from the rest of the world and change interlopers into other people could probably see the future as well. It was no leap of logic to accept such a power, given what I had already experienced.

Satisfied that I was being honest, he told me, “For centuries, my kind has stayed in the background. Our powers were neither needed nor desired by most of mankind. You could call it a form of retirement. Oh, we would step on the stage of history every now and then, just to keep our hand in things. Some of the scientists, poets, and artists in your history have been what your kind would call gods. We even became involved in a more direct way two thousand years ago, but have since decided direct involvement could be counterproductive.”

I wasn’t able to catch his meaning with that last remark, but I sensed from his tone that the results of the ‘involvement’ might have been not exactly what the gods had expected.

“Then a few years ago,” he went on, “we sensed a very serious threat which could have devastating effects on both your race and our own.” He motioned toward a computer monitor on his credenza—a monitor that I was sure had not been there before. The picture was in color, and what it showed was a large American-style skyline transforming into dust and blowing away in what was obviously a nuclear wind. The scene changed to another city—a middle eastern city which I was reasonably sure was Teheran. It, too, disintegrated in a nuclear fireball.

“The war for the last of the Earth’s oil is coming,” The Judge told me.

“War between America and Iran?” I asked.

“Among others,” The Judge replied. “Europe, Russia, China, even India will all be major players, shifting sides back and forth, trying to seek some advantage to keep their economies moving, but nothing will work. What starts as a conventional conflict will quickly escalate. Within three terrible years, all but the most backward parts of this world will be devastated beyond anyone’s imagining. Even in the areas which survive, mutations and collapse of local economies will be the order of the day.”

“Isn’t there any way of stopping it?” I asked, spellbound in spite of myself by the scenes of mindless destruction as I watched a futuristic Rome, Moscow, London, New York, and Damascus disappear from the world.

The Judge allowed a small, grim smile. “There may be. The future is not cast in stone. That is what we seek to prevent. You can help us prevent it, you know.”

“When will all of this happen?”

“In about sixty or seventy years,” he answered too surely. “We have already done a few required things which have put off the holocaust by a decade or so. However, unless something drastic is done, the world will inevitably plunge into a cataclysmic war before the end of this century.”

I thought about what he was showing me. Of course, there was a chance that what he was showing me wasn’t real. But somehow, I knew that it was real—all of it. Could it be that my men had been changed against their wills while working for the wrong side? Of course, the United States was well-intentioned. Most nations were. But good intentions appeared to be insufficient to prevent the world from sliding into what amounted to total destruction.

“Will you help us?” The Judge asked softly.

Even if I wanted to help him, what could I do? He wanted to know

where Steele was. I couldn't be sure even if I told him everything I knew. As for who had assigned us to this mission, he didn't really need me to tell him the answer. If Admiral Nepper was part of his operation, he must surely have others embedded who could tell him the name. As for our mission, I was beginning to think our mission was doomed from the start, with a meaningless objective and insufficient preparation.

And above all, I was a SEAL. I had taken an oath to follow the orders of those appointed over me. It was not my duty to decide to collaborate with someone who might be an enemy. At last, I shook my head. "I'm sorry: I have nothing to say."

The Judge was silent for a moment before raising his hand toward me. "I'm sorry, too," was all he said to me. I was suddenly jerked out of my chair to a standing position.

Twice I had seen The Judge transform men before my eyes, but now I was the target. What would I become? Would I become a small child like McCormick? Would I be a teenager like Doc and Hernandez? Or perhaps like Kast, I'd be transformed into a disadvantaged member of some minority race. No matter what my circumstances, I was almost certain I would be female. The Judge seemed to delight in turning men into women.

Yes, it was happening. There was no pain, but I could feel a strange tingling sensation, sort of like when your foot is asleep, but the tingling washed over my entire body. I could move, but only very slowly, and my actions were limited. I managed to look down at my chest in time to see two substantial breasts growing there under my shirt. I was able to watch as my shirt changed as well, becoming white, lacy and a little sheer, exposing the faint outline of a white bra covering my new breasts.

I had expected to feel pain as my anatomy changed in the most telling way of all, but there was only a tickling sensation between my legs as my penis and testicles retreated into a new opening, obviously forming into their female equivalents.

I could feel other changes as well, all happening at the same time. My hair became longer, tickling as it grew down my neck and over my back and shoulders. For a proper SEAL, it was as alien to have long, soft hair as it was to have new plumbing between my legs.

I could feel my heels rising up slightly, but I didn't seem any taller. In fact, I suspected I had lost several inches in height. A breeze was at my legs, caused by the transformation of my trousers as they re-knit themselves into what was obviously a knee-length skirt. My legs seemed to be wrapped in something, and I knew without looking that I now wore nylons.

I was suddenly able to move freely again, just as something poked through my ears leaving small weights on my lobes. My first action was just to close my eyes and sigh, trying to reconcile what had just been done to me with what I knew of the physical sciences. Since I could not, I had to accept in that unreal moment the absolute power of magic.

"You brought this on yourself, you know," The Judge told me.

I was barely listening to him, concerned instead about what I had become. I was a woman now: that much was painfully clear. But what sort of a woman had I become? At least I was an adult, I realized. Unlike McCormick, I wasn't a young child, and unlike the others in my team. Both my figure and my clothing seemed too mature to be a teen.

I realized suddenly that I was old enough to be married. In fear, I looked down at my left hand. To my relief, my ring finger was bare. But to my consternation, the hand was slim and delicate, with subtly feminine fingernails coated in frosted silver. This was a hand that had never held an automatic weapon and would probably chip a nail trying to throw a grenade.

"If you want to know who you are, I suggest you look in your purse," The Judge said matter-of-factly, nodding toward a brown leather shoulder bag lying on the edge of his desk.

Without replying, I snatched the purse, rummaging past the tissues

and cosmetics inside it to a slim woman's wallet. It only took me a moment to find 'my' driver's license. The picture showed a rather plain-looking woman, and I found I was uncharacteristically concerned that I wasn't better looking. Then I remembered that pictures on driver's licenses were invariably poor. A second look revealed fairly short brown hair trimmed in a decidedly feminine fashion, large dark eyes, a slender, attractive face, and a friendly smile. I might not be Miss America, but I wasn't too shabby.

My name was listed as Gabriella Leone. I was thirty-three years old, so I had lost four years. According to the license, I didn't wear glasses and had no physical impairments. I lived on Whippoorwill Road—a street I remembered passing when we had walked into town. At least I lived in a nice if modest neighborhood. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to get done," The Judge said gruffly.

"But, what do I do now?" I asked, hearing for the first time my sweet, feminine voice.

The Judge looked at me with an expression of bland indifference. "Why, you do whatever you want to do." Then he added, "Officer Mercer will take you back to your school."

School?

Officer Mercer took me gently by the arm and led me out of the room. As we walked, I felt for the first time the sensations naturally-born women must take for granted. There was the feel of my hair bouncing up and down as it tickled my neck and ears. There was the odd sensation of something tugging lightly at my earlobes. Then even more pronounced, was the exaggerated feeling of movement from parts of my body—my breasts, my hips, my ass, and even my waist. I knew deep down that the movement wasn't as great as it seemed, but the obvious changes in my body structure blew the sensations out of proportion.

Then there were my clothes—while my shirt—blouse if you will—didn't seem too different from what I had worn as a male, the skirt was completely alien. Although I realized it was fairly conservative, its

openness made me feel as if I was wearing nothing at all below my waist. I thought with horror how easy it would be for a big man like Officer Mercer to throw me on my back, lift that flimsy skirt, and enjoy my new sex before I could manage to get my new weaker muscles to mount any defense. No wonder many women live in fear of a sexual assault.

Perhaps the oddest sensations of all though, were my heels and nylons. I realized I was wearing pantyhose—I could feel them clinging to my thighs and rubbing against my panties. There was no equivalent sensation in my experience wearing men's clothing. It wasn't really an unpleasant sensation—just odd. As for the heels, they required me to walk in an entirely different fashion, shifting my weight subtly to maintain proper balance—a difficult task given the new width of my hips and the expanse of my breasts.

As Officer Mercer held the front door of his car open for me, I tried to remember how women got into cars. I didn't want to put on a show for the small crowd of onlookers, many of whom might have a pretty good idea what had just happened to me. I actually did a credible job of slipping in with unaccustomed but necessary feminine decorum.

"Where are we going?" I asked once Officer Mercer had started the car.

"Orion Middle School," he told me. "You teach geography."

Geography? It seemed like a thankless job, I thought, remembering my own experiences in geography many years ago. Besides, why geography? I knew nothing about the subject to speak of. It was bad enough that I had been changed into a woman against my will, but now I was expected to stand up before a class of smart-assed kids and talk about a subject I was unqualified to teach. The Judge had really dumped on me, it seemed.

Officer Mercer had nothing further to say as he drove me to the start of my new life. Of course, I had nothing to say to him, either. I was too busy trying to withdraw into my own mind—my masculine mind—where none of this was real. As a result, when he stopped in front of a fairly

new single-level school where a sign in front announced 'Home of the Orion Centaurs,' I simply exited the car and walked into the building without a backward glance.

Later, I found out I had unintentionally surrendered myself into some form of autonomic control the locals laughing called either "autopilot" or "cruise control." I suppose it was for the best, because I didn't even have to ask for directions to my classroom. Classes were apparently already underway. I stood just outside the classroom door as the auto-control faded away.

A middle-aged woman with short, dark hair and a pair of glasses attached to a thin gold chain stopped what she was saying to the class and turned to me. "Class, study that map of the Caribbean I gave you for a moment, please."

As the sound of paper being shuffled grew louder, the woman hurried to the hallway where I was waiting. "Well see, Gabby? That didn't take so long after all, did it?"

"Uh... no," I stammered, unsure of what she was talking about.

"Jury duty seldom takes very long in The Judge's court," she went on smugly. "Well, I'm glad you got back early. Sam is taking me out to dinner tonight. As nice as it is to take over your classes for a day, it will be good to get home and take a nice warm bath before Sam gets home." She smiled and gave me a little wave before leaving.

It finally dawned on me what had just happened. Gabriella Leone—the shade Gabby—had to be gone for a while to allow for my entrance. Apparently everyone who was either a shade or a transformed person who had no memories of a previous life—like the woman I had just spoken with—would believe I had been on jury duty for the day. Of course, anyone who retained their memories of previous lives would probably suspect what was going on. In fact, they would know it the minute they saw Gabby Leone was no longer a shade.

That meant a number of the students in my classes would know. But would they suspect I had once been a man? It was embarrassing enough to find myself transformed into a woman without having

people snicker about it behind my back.

Then I realized that a significant number of my students would have had the same thing happen to them. The Judge seemed to enjoy changing men into women, so how many of the cute little teen girls in my class remembered having a dick between their legs?

In spite of my rationalizations, I nearly bolted and ran from the school. I had no desire to pretend to be a woman. Besides, I knew nothing about teaching geography. But, I reasoned, there was no immediate escape from Ovid. While in the town, I would have to eat, have to have a place to live. That would take money. At least as a teacher, I'd be able to support myself while...

While what?

I tried to put what had happened to me in a military perspective. It was as if I had been captured by the enemy and placed in some bizarre prison camp. As a military officer, it was my duty to escape. But that would take planning and possibly the help of my fellow military prisoners. In the meantime, I would have to appear as if I had accepted my imprisonment. I would have to play the part I had been given, to lull the enemy into a false sense of security. In short, I would have to be Gabriella Leone—at least for the time being.

I strode into the classroom, trying to look confident. I couldn't help but notice several members of the class were giving me knowing looks, as if their suspicions had been confirmed. I even saw one girl slip a couple of dollars to a grinning boy—probably the result of a bet as to what had happened to their teacher. Of course, many just looked like normal students—except for the ones who looked a little transparent. But all of them looked like a typical middle school class—bored and restless.

"All right then," I said, standing before the class, "where did Mrs...." I suddenly realized I didn't know the substitute's name. "Where did you all leave off?"

"We were talking about Cuba," one sweet little blonde girl piped up. Her bright manner and cheery smile were the marks of a girl who

wanted to succeed in her class work. I made a mental note to get her name. She would be a good go-to person for a correct answer.

“Nah, we were talking about Haiti,” a boy near the back of the room stated.

“You were talking about Haiti,” the blonde said coolly. “The rest of us were talking about Cuba.”

That got a chuckle from some of the other students.

“Let’s see what you know about Haiti then,” I challenged the boy.

It led to a good discussion. I was surprised the boy actually knew quite a bit about the tiny, troubled nation. In fact, I found myself really getting into the discussion with them. It did help that I had been on covert missions in both countries, plus a couple of other island nations in the region, so I found I was able to give the class quite a bit of information not included in their textbooks. We had moved on to a discussion of some of the economic problems faced by a number of nations in the region when the bell rang.

The class time had actually gone by very smoothly, and I noticed a little smile of relief from several of the students who I suspected retained their old memories. I think they feared I would not live up to the reputation of someone I suspected had been a popular teacher. I just hoped I could keep it up.

I hurriedly went through my lesson planner, happy to note that it was now the last period of the day—a free period for me. It gave me the opportunity to study the seating chart and review what was expected of the classes. The more I learned, the more I actually began to look at my assignment as an acceptable challenge. I had taught a little in the Navy, so I wasn’t entirely new at the game. But teaching a bunch of middle school students would be different from teaching a bunch of SEAL trainees. For one thing, there was no forced military discipline in my new classroom. I would have to develop a teaching style compatible with my teenage students. It wouldn’t be easy, but I’d find a way.

Not that I had given up my plans to escape. No, I still planned to do that, but where was it written that I couldn't enjoy myself while formulating that escape plan? To be honest, teaching the class had been an entertaining experience, and I suspected the students in this school were probably of a higher caliber than those found in most schools.

The only thing that continued to gnaw at me was the realization that even if I escaped, I would still be a woman. There seemed to be no escape from that. But if I had understood The Judge correctly, this Admiral Nepper was possibly in our custody. If so, perhaps some sort of a deal could be made. Perhaps my men and I could be changed back into our masculine selves in return for this admiral. If that didn't work, there had to be some other way back to masculinity. The key thing was to complete our mission and escape any way possible.

Just after the final bell rang and the gaggle of students had mostly rushed from the building, I heard a girl's voice from the doorway. "Hi."

I looked up. It was one of the girls I had seen leaving The Judge's office the day before. I was sure she was either Doc or Hernandez. Whoever she was, she just stood there looking at me quizzically.

"Hi yourself," I answered cautiously.

She stared at me. "You don't know me, do you?"

She hadn't been in my only class that afternoon. I couldn't very well fake it, so I remained silent. My silence was all the answer she needed.

"Who are you? Kast? McCormick? Lieutenant Harmon?" she asked.

"I'm Harmon," I replied, knowing her to be one of my former men and relieved that she had kept her own memories. "Who are you?"

"I'm Doc," she replied. "You'll have Hernandez in your nine o'clock class. He's Heather Abbot now and doesn't remember a thing about his real life."

"Kast and McCormick remember, but McCormick is a five-year-old white girl now."

In spite of our situations, the girl—Doc—giggled. “That’s got to really piss McCormick off.”

I actually smiled. “I think he’s more pissed to find himself white than he is about being a girl.”

“I’m not surprised,” she responded, looking out into a quiet hall. “Just about everyone else has left. We’d better get out of here before the custodians lock up the building. Let’s go home.”

“Home?”

She closed her eyes and sighed, “Oh that’s right. You don’t know, do you? You see, you’re my mom.”

“It’s ironic when you think about it,” she began once we were in the car. She pushed back a pretty lock of hair in a surprisingly feminine gesture. “You were in charge of me on the mission, and now after all The Judge did to us, you’re still in charge of me.”

I just nodded. It was bad enough to be a woman. I certainly hadn’t bargained on being a mother. Not wanting kids was one of many things that caused my marriage to go sour.

“Turn left at the next corner,” she directed me. “Our house is the third one on the right.” She pointed with a polished nail, coated in bright red.

“You seem to be taking this in stride,” I pointed out.

“So are you,” she replied. “I think it’s part of the magic. I mean, just think about what a mess this place would be if every guy who got changed into a girl was running around town whining about it. I think we’re given something like a tranquilizer to make us more receptive to the changes.”

“Sort of like brainwashing.”

“Sort of,” she agreed, “but a lot more sophisticated. For example, have you gone to the bathroom yet?”

I shook my head.

“When you do, you’ll find out it just seems right to sit to pee. And when you’re finished, you’ll probably just wipe without even thinking about it. All the easy stuff is taken care of.”

As I pulled up in front of a modest, older house with a matching detached garage, I ventured, “Yeah, but what about...”

“Periods?” she asked bluntly.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know,” she said softly. “I guess we don’t have them for the first couple of months we’re here. At least that’s what some of the changed girls at school told me. I think they’re afraid that will really freak us out. Also, it keeps us from getting pregnant until we’ve learned how to handle our bodies.”

“Pregnant?” I practically yelled as we got out of the car. I hadn’t even considered that possibility. To get pregnant, you had to have sex with a man. I had no intention of doing something as perverted as that. After all, I wasn’t a queer.

Wait a minute. I had a daughter. That meant... “Oh god! Doc, I’m not married or anything, am I?”

“No,” she laughed. “As nearly as I can tell, dear old dad died in a plane crash a couple of years ago. I guess the insurance money has started running a little low. That’s why you went back to teaching instead of being a stay-at-home mom.”

“Thank god for that!” I exclaimed as we walked in the house. I couldn’t imagine staying home all day being Susie Homemaker.

Doc gave me a sly grin. “But you do have a boyfriend...”

“Oh shit!”

I wanted to hear Doc’s story. He—she—had been in her new form for more than a day and had obviously learned some valuable information. But before I listened to her story, I wanted to get out of the feminine outfit I was wearing. A skirt and heels didn’t seem like the right clothing to wear to a debriefing. Doc giggled (that’s right—

giggled!) at my distaste for traditional feminine attire and elected to remain in her short little denim skirt and pink tank top.

As I stripped out of my school clothes, I realized I was to be immersed in things womanly and fragrant. My bedroom smelled of distinctly feminine scents I had not experienced since my marriage broke up. With no husband to tone things down, the room had more frills than an old-fashioned woman's petticoat. I'd have to make some changes to all of that, I told myself.

I stripped down to the basic bra and panties, pleased to see that my new undies were not too outlandishly feminine—if you ignored the little bow and flower sewed into the center of my bra. Still, I nearly cringed at the soft, smooth curves of my body. I was obviously in pretty good shape, but it wasn't a shape I had ever wanted to have for my very own.

I even managed to go to the head—excuse me—the bathroom without cringing too much. Doc was right: it didn't seem all that unnatural. I was pleased to note that the experience wasn't as odd as I had thought it would be, but it wasn't something I ever wanted to try while standing up in this body.

I dressed quickly, relieved to see among all the feminine finery there was an ample supply of jeans and sweatshirts. The jeans were excruciatingly tight in the ass and the crotch, but I managed, slipping on a white sweatshirt emblazoned with a purple Kansas State wildcat, which was long enough to hide my rather nice ass. I slipped on a pair of sweat socks as well, electing to go without shoes when I noticed the only tennis ones in the closet had pink laces.

Doc was pouring two diet sodas in the kitchen when I rejoined her. I couldn't help but think how much she looked like Buffy's sister with her long brown hair and delicate features. Her movements were decidedly feminine, as she deftly brushed a lock of hair away without spilling a drop. 'Was something similar happening to me?' I wondered. 'Would observers think that I walked and talked like a youngish teacher? Mother? Woman?'

“I thought we could use something to drink,” she said, placing the drinks at the kitchen table.

I sat, nodding, as I took a sip. A sip. I didn’t gulp or slam it down. I took a sip. Good God, it was already starting!

Doc smiled. She knew. I tried to ignore her look.

“So what have you discovered?” I asked her once she was seated.

She shrugged a very girlish shrug while twirling her hair with slim fingers. “It’s all pretty much what they told us in the briefing,” she began. She went on to explain how she and Hernandez had been captured by Officer Mercer and taken to see The Judge. He apparently made the same offer to them that he made to us and was turned down by both men. The major difference occurred when Hernandez was transformed.

“I was already as you see me now,” Doc explained. “I was still coming to grips with what had been done to me when I saw Hernandez begin to change. I expected him to do the same thing I had done when I realized what had been done to me—I screamed. Instead, he just looked confused for a moment and then smiled this weird little bimbo smile.

“The next thing I knew, she was thanking The Judge for helping us with our civics paper. She looked at me and said, ‘Come on, let’s go.’ When I failed to respond, she called me by my new name, although I didn’t recognize it. It took me a few seconds, but I suddenly realized she was talking to me. She knew my name—my new name. Even I didn’t know it at that time. Then I realized she thought she had always been Heather Abbot. I’ll tell you, Lieutenant, it was downright scary.”

“I wonder why Hernandez was the only one of us to lose his identity,” I mused.

Doc shrugged. “I don’t know. I didn’t know him that well. A better question is why four of us remembered who we were. I hear that’s a higher number than the norm. If I had to guess, I’d say that we remembered because we knew what was coming, so the shock wasn’t

quite as great.”

“But Hernandez knew, too,” I pointed out.

“Yeah,” she agreed, “but I don’t think he really believed it. Maybe the more rigid your thinking, the less chance there is of keeping your memories.”

I took another unconsciously delicate sip of my drink. “So what have you learned about Ovid?”

“Quite a bit,” she replied. “It seems just about everybody who remembers their old lives tries to help you along. Four or five girls came up to me and offered to help me—one at a time, of course.”

“Then it really is impossible for more than two people to discuss what’s really going on here?”

“You got it,” Doc smiled. “Anyhow, one of the girls told me her dad works for Vulman Industries. Her dad can’t talk about it, but it sounds as if they’re working on something pretty big. It’s some sort of new motor.”

“Given that they make fuel pumps, I guess that makes sense,” I mused. “But what are a bunch of technophobic g... g...” I gulped. Since my transformation, I could no longer discuss Ovid as a creation of ancient gods. “What are... these beings... doing building a new type of motor?”

“They are just supervising, from the sound of it. Remember, there was one... being who had something of a technological bent.”

Yes, I thought. Vulcan. Of course. Vulman was Vulcan. “Where do they get their engineers?” I asked. “Surely even the g... they can’t manufacture a creative engineering talent out of nothing.”

“They don’t,” Doc agreed. “They hire most of them. A few are engineers just passing through town who get picked up in The Judge’s net. But more of them—including Dana’s dad—are hired from outside at pretty hefty salaries. Apparently we’ve got a brain drain within our own country.”

I nodded. Dana had to be the name of the girl she was referring to.
“Can this Dana get us into Vulman?”

“Maybe on a school field trip!” Doc laughed. “Apparently there have already been a couple of security breaches out there, so I imagine they’ve tightened things up.”

We had been checking out the wrong places. We should have made an attempt to get into Vulman Industries instead of wasting our time wandering around Main Street. Damn! It should have been a military operation from the start. If we had come into town with a sufficient force—a sufficient armed force—I doubted if even Officer Mercer could have been fast enough to stop us. Allowing a bunch of civilian spooks to task a military unit was like asking The Three Stooges to supervise brain surgery.

“We need to get some info out of Vulman and figure out a way out of this town,” I decided.

“Like this?” Doc asked, motioning to herself. “How do we get back to our own identities? If we’re leaving, I’d just as soon not be Sophia Maria Leone.”

For some reason, that amused me. “Sophia? Your name is Sophia?”

Her face reddened. “Yeah.”

“Like in Sophia Loren?”

“Yeah, like in Sophia Loren. Now look, just quit that smirking, Gabriella. Or should I call you Gabby?”

It was my turn to redden.

A sly look crossed her face. “No, I guess not. I know. I’ll call you ‘mom.’ Okay, Mom?”

She didn’t look so sly when I replied. “Maybe you should call me mom. After all, that’s the way everyone else will see us. That means, Sophie dear, you had better act the dutiful daughter, don’t you agree?”

“Now wait a minute.”

“No, I think that’s a good idea. I’ll be mom and you’ll be my obedient daughter. That means you get to work on your homework while I make dinner. Then you can clean up after dinner and study for a while more. You’ll get an hour of TV time if you have everything done.”

“What? There’s a Cubs game on tonight, and...”

“I want you in bed by ten, young lady,” I said sternly. “Is that understood?”

“Mo-om!” she whined. Then suddenly, she froze, shocked at the sound of her own voice. “What did I just say?”

“Remember the autopilot idea in the briefing?” I reminded her. “You reacted like the teenaged girl you’ve become.” I didn’t point out how naturally I had fallen into the role of her mother, though.

“Shit!”

“Yeah,” I acknowledged. “Shit.”

“We’ve got to be careful,” my new daughter murmured. “We could really start acting like mother and daughter.”

“Speaking of acting,” I said, changing the subject, “what’s this about me having a boyfriend?”

Her look of amusement suddenly changed to alarm as the doorbell rang. “Oh shit! That’s him now!”

“That’s who?”

“Mike. Mike Melrose.” When she saw my confused expression, she stage-whispered, “Your boyfriend.”

Oh shit was right. “What do I do?”

“Answer the door,” she suggested. “Play it by ear. I’ll try to get you up to speed.”

As I walked to the door, I thought nervously that I should have asked about my boyfriend first. Granted, I could have simply refused to answer the door. After all, just about the last thing on Earth I wanted at that moment was a boyfriend. I couldn’t imagine anything more

perverted. But until I figured out a plan of action, my best bet was to act as natural (at least natural for Gabriella Leone) as I could. That way, The Judge would assume I had knuckled under and I'd be off his radar.

I just hoped Gabby's relationship with her boyfriend was reasonably platonic. I was willing to play along, so long as there were no sudden moves toward the bedroom. Who was this Mike guy anyhow? Was he a shade? Was he real—and if he was real, did he remember who he was? Or was he one of the minor gods I knew were salted among the general population? Maybe he was like that girl's father that Doc—Sophie—had mentioned—a real person who had moved to Ovid to work for Vulman.

After taking a deep, deep breath, I opened the door.

"Pizza delivery!" a tall, good-looking guy complete with blond hair and a neatly-trimmed moustache said, displaying a large pizza box with 'Tony's Real Italian Pizzeria' emblazoned on the top and sides.

For a moment, I thought he might really be the pizza deliveryman. Maybe Sophie had ordered a pie while I was changing. But the broad, impish grin on his face said otherwise. "Come on in... Mike," I stammered.

"Is that any kind of a greeting for the guy who made dinner for you tonight?" he asked lightly, deftly balancing the pizza box in one hand as he swept me to him with the other. Before I could react, my lips were pressed against his. I could smell his masculine odor, feel the faint stubble of whiskers on his cheek, and the ticklish sensation of his moustache on my upper lip. I did my best not to fight the kiss—at least part of the kiss. I did manage to keep my lips close enough together to avoid having a mouthful of tongue.

He let go of me and looked into my soft brown eyes with his steely blue ones. "Something wrong, Gabby?"

"No!" I laughed nervously. "It was just a... just a long day." That was an understatement.

“Well this will make you feel better,” he pronounced, gliding past me to the kitchen. “I got a barbecued chicken pizza—your favorite.”

Actually, my favorite was one with lots of pepperoni, sausage, and globs of gooey cheese and sharp tomato sauce on them. I never went in for the boutique pizzas with all the silly toppings on them. Still, I managed a small smile.

“Thanks.”

If he noticed my obvious lack of enthusiasm, he said nothing, setting the pizza into the oven and punch in the ‘Warm’ setting to keep the pizza hot. “Where’s Sophie?”

Sophie was in the hallway leading to the bedrooms, motioning silently for me to join her.

“Uh... she’s working on her homework right now,” I managed. “In fact, I have to help her with something. Excuse me for a moment... Mike.”

He just grunted, “No problem,” while helping himself to a diet soda from the refrigerator. His familiarity with my kitchen told me he had been here often. That meant he was a serious boyfriend—which spelled serious trouble for me.

I shut the door to Sophie’s room behind me and asked in a low voice, “What am I going to do? He kissed me! The bastard actually kissed me!”

Sophie grinned that little evil grin again. “I think he’s done a lot more than just kiss you.” I could feel the color draining from my face, as she hurriedly added, “I don’t think you have to worry about tonight since I’m here. I was here last night and he was pretty much a gentleman. Besides, he’s trying to cultivate me—probably so when he announces that he’s my new daddy, I won’t freak out.”

Yeah, but the day he announced that would be the day I freaked out. “Who is he? Not his name—I mean what does he do? Where is he from?”

“He’s track and field coach for Capta College,” she explained. “He’s... thirty-four, I think. He was married right out of college, but his wife left

him about seven or eight years ago. I don't know where he's from. He just moved here about a year ago."

"For real or is he one of the transformed who doesn't remember a previous life?"

Sophie shrugged, flipping her hair back from her ear in a disturbingly female gesture. "I don't know for sure. He seems normal enough, though, so I suppose it doesn't really matter."

"But how do I act?" I pressed. "Should I ask him to leave? I'm not in any mood to be pawed by some big hunk..."

"You really think he's a hunk?" There was that grin again.

"Knock it off, Doc!" I ordered, purposefully using his former name.

"This is serious. We've still got a mission to perform."

"I agree," she said, equally seriously. "That's why you have to act naturally. The Judge may have spies checking up on us. If we act like we're blending in, they'll probably leave us alone. Then we can finish the mission and get out of here."

Damn. I hated it when she was right. "Okay, so what do I do?"

"Just act the way you liked girlfriends to act," she suggested.

"No way," I protested. "I liked it when my girlfriends stripped off all of their clothes and told me to fuck them."

Her eyes narrowed. "You know that isn't what I mean. And stop with the 'F' word. It's out of character."

I grunted and Sophie winced. Apparently grunting was out of character, too.

"All right," I sighed. "I'll make nice. But if the bastard sticks his hand in my pants, I'm gonna break all of his fingers."

On the whole, the evening went okay. Mostly, Mike and I talked about our respective days. Since we were both associated with education, I talked mostly about the students in my classes and Mike told me about some of his incoming members of the track team. Sophie joined

us after about fifteen minutes in which she was supposedly doing her homework, and the three of us sat around the kitchen table eating pizza and talking. Once I got into the rhythm of things, I could almost imagine myself sitting around with a couple of old SEAL buddies at some little restaurant off base.

After dinner, Sophie volunteered to clean up while Mike offered to take me for a walk. That actually sounded great to me. As a SEAL, I was used to physical activity, and the sedentary lifestyle of Gabby Leone was already starting to wear on me.

We walked along quiet streets lined with large oaks and green, well-tended lawns. There were few children playing along our route—probably settling into homework as the first week of fall classes got into full swing. It was a pleasant neighborhood, and I couldn't help but think that Ovid seemed somehow to represent the quality of life that as a SEAL I had fought so hard to protect. It seemed to me that The Judge and his cronies didn't need to kidnap people to live in Ovid: many would have moved here gladly, even if it meant being transformed.

"You're awfully quiet tonight," Mike observed as we strolled in the twilight.

"Just thinking," I replied honestly.

"Did I say something wrong? Are you mad at me?"

I stopped and looked at him. "What makes you say that?"

He had stopped, too. "I don't know. You just seem... different somehow."

That made me uncomfortable. I was trying so hard to appear as much like Gabby as possible. If any of The Judge's fellow gods could hear Mike, they might think I wasn't working at fitting in and decide to watch me more closely. That would interfere with my intention of completing my assigned mission.

"Like how?" I asked carefully, hoping he would be honest enough to tell me the truth. I couldn't act like the Gabby he knew unless he told

me what was wrong.

Mike shrugged. "I don't know. When we kissed tonight, you seemed a little tense. Now, here we are on our walk and you didn't take my hand like you usually do. Gabby, you mean a lot to me, and I just don't want you angry with me."

I couldn't help but feel just a little bit sorry for him. Unbeknownst to him, his lady love had been replaced—and replaced by a man who thought showing affection to another man was a very bad idea. Mike seemed like a good guy—the sort of guy I wouldn't have minded having a few beers with when I was still a man. He even looked fit enough to be a SEAL for that matter.

Trying not to look reluctant, I took his large, rough hand in my small smooth one. "I'm sorry, Mike. It's just the pressure of a new school year and all," I lied. I managed to give him a little smile. "Please forgive me?"

He smiled back, looking at least a little relieved. Then he squeezed my hand. "I'm glad you're not mad at me," he said. "Particularly with Saturday night coming up and all."

Saturday night? What was coming up Saturday night? Today was only Wednesday. I'd have to ask Sophie if she knew anything about Saturday.

We walked slowly down the street. I decided to do my best to put my body on autopilot. It wasn't that hard. All I had to do was to relax and smell the fragrant odors of late summer and listen to the chirp of thousands of insects to lull myself into a mindless state. I felt my body sidling up to get closer to Mike, until at last my hand slipped from his and rested around his masculine waist while his arm slid around my indented and very feminine one.

Strangely, it didn't seem as gay as I thought it would. It actually felt... well, good—sort of a secure feeling. I remembered a similar feeling when I had been a small boy, cuddled by my mother until my father told her to stop it and treat me like a boy and not a sissy. The rational part of my mind suspected that my reaction was something inherited

from the unconscious memory of the shade who had preceded me in this identity. Perhaps those of us who were transformed inherited more from the shades than we realized. Whatever the reason, I felt somehow at peace as we walked back toward my house.

By the time we were home, it was truly dark. From the porch, I could see Sophie in the living room, reading a textbook while lounging on the couch under the light of a pole lamp.

"It looks like Sophie is digging right in this semester," Mike observed. "Maybe that talk you had with her about getting her grades up this year did some good."

Of course I had no idea what I was supposed to have said, so I just nodded.

"I'll drop by after my run in the morning and take you out for coffee before your classes," he offered.

Run?

"What time are you running?" I asked.

He shrugged. "The usual time—five thirty."

"Then come by at oh five... I mean five thirty and I'll run with you," I decided on a sudden whim.

He looked as if I had just told him that the Cubs had moved to New Orleans. "You... you want to run with me?"

"Isn't that what I just said?"

His look of confusion dissipated, replaced by sudden understanding—or so he thought. I could see the wheels turning. He must have thought I wanted an excuse to be with him, even though Gabby was apparently not a runner. At last, he said, "You know, I keep a pretty fast pace..."

"How fast?" I asked, not backing down for a second.

"Well," Mike replied, "I have a course I run that's right at four miles. I usually run it in thirty-six minutes."

That was a mile every nine minutes. It was a good pace—for an amateur. SEALs were expected to run four miles at seven and a half minutes to the mile—while wearing boots! Most of us did considerably better than that. “Pick me up at five thirty.”

Before he could answer, I gave him a quick kiss on the lips. It wasn’t that I suddenly had this great desire to be kissing guys, but I knew from personal experience that a guy will shut up and stop arguing the second he’s kissed. It had been done to me more than once when I was a guy.

Of course it worked. He gave me a boyish smile and said, “See you at five thirty.”

I heard him drive away as I closed the door. Sophie was looking at me with amusement. “How was your first date as a girl?” she asked wickedly.

“It wasn’t a date,” I protested. “We just went for a walk.”

“Call it what you will,” she grinned. “And what’s this about running with him in the morning?”

“Why not?” I was a little annoyed that she had overheard us. That meant she probably also knew I had kissed Mike.

“Have you taken a good look at that body you’ve got now?” she asked. “There’s no way you’re going to be in any shape to keep up with him.”

“You may be right,” I admitted, “but if I’m going to be stuck in this body for any time, I’ve got to get it in fighting shape. Besides, I know a few tricks that will allow me to keep up.”

“Maybe if that were a male body,” she argued. “I’ve been in this body a few hours longer than you though, and I can tell you that just like walking is a little different, running is real different. Besides, you won’t have the strength or the stride to keep up with him.”

“We’ll see,” I said, but my confidence was slipping a little. Why in hell had I been so impulsive about trying to run with Mike? Maybe it was because I didn’t like having him assume that I couldn’t (or wouldn’t) do it. Maybe Sophie was right. I should have started modestly if I was

going to run in this body and build up to a respectable pace. But now I was stuck. I'd just have to make the best of it.

"I think you like him," Sophie chuckled.

"Well, sure," I replied. "Mike seems like a good guy—you know, one guy to another."

"Except you aren't a guy anymore," she pointed out.

My eyes narrowed. "Just what are you saying?"

She closed the textbook and sighed, "Look, I'm just saying that from what some of the other girls tell me, Ovid has a way of sneaking up on you. One minute, you think your old self is in control, and the next minute, the new you takes over. It's even happening to me. I got kind of silly when this cute boy..."

"Cute boy?"

"Yeah, when this cute boy came up to me at lunch today and put a few moves on me."

"Doc," I asked, intentionally using Sophie's old name, "you aren't..."

"Into boys?" she finished for me. She shook her head. "No, I sure as hell wasn't before, but function may follow form. Girls don't look that sexy to me right now. I got a chance to see a bunch of little sweethearts at gym today, and they didn't do a thing for me. Then I realized I was a sweetheart, too. Imagine what it will be like after a week or so."

"That's why we've got to get out of here," I pointed out. "Tomorrow, let's get back on our mission."

"Sure," Sophie agreed. "After your run of course."

"Of course."

It took me less than a mile the next morning to regret my bravado the night before. First off, I didn't get nearly the sleep I had expected to get. As a man, I usually slept in my boxers, but as a woman, sleeping

in just panties proved to be a bad idea. For the first time in my life, I realized why women (including my ex-wife) had been so obsessive about smooth sheets with a high thread count. Female skin seemed much more sensitive than male skin—particularly around the nipples. I discovered quickly that women covered their breasts while sleeping out of more than modesty.

Embarrassed half to death, I managed to find a nightgown which didn't look too overtly feminine. The soft, sheer material felt soothing on my breasts, so one problem was solved. I tried to tell myself that in the darkness, it didn't matter that it had little satin bows at strategic places done up in the same pastel yellow as the gown itself.

Next, there was the hair. I realized to my dismay that I would have to do something to keep it out of my face. I let myself go on automatic for a few minutes and managed to get my hair tied back in some semblance of order. I had no idea how Sophie coped with her hair, which was considerably longer than mine.

At that point, I managed to get to sleep, but not for long. Each restless turn of my body awakened me as the unfamiliar sway of my breasts startled me. It took me some time to find reasonably comfortable sleeping positions which complemented my new curves.

So I woke up exhausted. I thought about taking a shower, but realized that would be a waste of time since I'd just have to do it again after my run. Sophie got up with me, chortling as I combed through my drawers looking for something to run in that didn't make me look like a waterfront hooker. The white sports bra and thin red running shorts exposed a lot more of the new me than I would have liked, but I had to settle on them.

"Your hair is a mess," Sophie observed as she helped me untangle it. She then gathered it into a relatively short ponytail.

"Where did you learn to do all this?" I asked suspiciously.

"I had three sisters," she explained. "They were all older than me, and I had to watch them primp in front of a lot of mirrors. Don't ask me about makeup, though. I had to go on automatic to do that."

“Maybe I just won’t wear any,” I thought out loud. Looking into the mirror, I could honestly say I didn’t need much to improve my face. Neither did Sophie. In fact, it was easy to tell that we were supposed to be mother and daughter—we both had the same dark hair and olive complexions, and our faces were shaped much the same. We weren’t drop-dead gorgeous, but we were both reasonably attractive.

“You’ll need some,” Sophie told me. “Remember, the idea is to fit in. No makeup would arouse some questions.”

“Is there special makeup I should wear for my run?” I asked caustically.

“Yeah,” she replied. “Try something that will take the red out of your skin when you get winded.”

“I won’t get winded.”

“Need I remind you that you’re not in your old body?”

I looked down at my ample breasts. “No, these things are reminder enough.”

And on the run, they proved to be very substantial reminders.

“Having trouble?” Mike called. He was running at perhaps half his normal pace, so he wasn’t even slightly winded.

“I guess I’m not in that good a shape,” I panted, gasping out each word. My lungs were in pain, and my legs felt as if they were in a vice. I was spent and I had just begun my run.

“I appreciate you wanting to run with me,” Mike said sincerely, his hand on my arm to steady me as we slowed to a walk, “but you need to build up to it. You haven’t done this before, have you?”

How could I explain to him that just twenty-four hours earlier, I could have outrun his fastest pace and barely broken a sweat? But as Gabby, I had certainly never run before. Honestly and humbly, I shook my head.

Mike wrapped his arms around my exhausted body and held me tightly as he planted a warm kiss on my panting lips. It should have

repulsed me, but it felt comforting given my physical state. “But you were willing to try it for me.” I was too tired to disabuse him of that notion. He looked into my unfocused eyes. “That’s why I love you so much,” he said softly.

This guy had it bad, I realized suddenly. I could have served him a shit sandwich on shoe leather and he would have called it a banquet. I had seen guys go gaga over a girl before: I had just never been the girl then. “I need to walk home,” I told him, trying to wriggle free from his grasp.

“Wait until you’ve caught your breath,” he advised.

I nodded, wordlessly. I felt like hell. It was bad enough to be stuck in the body of a woman, but to feel so weak and out of shape was too much. All my life, I had been athletic—always the fastest runner with the greatest endurance. Now, I was a wimp—and a female wimp at that.

Mike walked me home. We had to take it slow because my leg muscles were already screaming from unaccustomed activity. At least I got my breath back.

“You going to be okay?” Mike asked at the door.

“Yeah,” I muttered.

Mike kissed me again—a quick one this time. “See you tonight?”

I nodded. I was too tired to argue with him.

“I tried to warn you,” Sophie crowed as I hobbled into the house.

“Shut up,” I growled, stripping off my sweaty sports bra. If anyone had been looking in the living room window, they would have gotten quite a show, but I didn’t care. I just wanted to fall into the shower as soon as possible and soothe my aching muscles.

“Go on automatic,” she advised. “Otherwise, you’ll be late for school. So will I for that matter, since you’re supposed to be taking me.”

At least I had sense enough not to get my hair wet. It wasn’t terribly long, but it would have taken me a while to dry it. I tried to ignore my

new body, content to let the water run over my abused anatomy. Well, I did manage to play with my nipples just a little—just to see if they really were as sensitive as some women had led me to believe.

They were.

The triangle of downy hair between my legs remained shrouded in mystery, though. I washed there quickly and rinsed, trying to ignore the emptiness I had been cursed with. If I was forced to remain a woman forever, there would be time enough for experimenting later. However, given the buzz I had gotten from my nipples, I certainly wasn't ready to go any further—not if I planned to make it to school on time.

As I waited in my classroom for my first hour civics class to begin, I reviewed in my mind a few pertinent points from the Code of Conduct all military personnel agree to follow if they become prisoners of war. Already, I had invoked it in my mind to avoid answering The Judge's questions. That was in Article Five of the Code. Now, I was about to embark upon Articles Three and Four. Article Four demanded that as the senior officer, I take command, and Article Three instructed me to attempt to escape and aid others to escape as well. That was just what I planned to do.

I had asked Sophie to keep an eye out for Kast. He—now she—would be about Sophie's present age. Although it appeared Hernandez was lost and McCormick stuck in the body of a girl too young to help us, I had hopes that Kast, Sophie and I would be able to complete our mission in spite of our changes and get away from Ovid.

"Mrs. Leone?"

I looked up to see two girls—identical twins, in fact—staring at me from the doorway. They were both about Sophie's age, with bright red hair and about a million freckles apiece spread across bright, cute faces. They wore identical clothing—short white skirts and Kelly green knit tops. I had known identical twins before, but never had I seen two girls who looked as much alike as these two. Even the expressions on their faces were so identical that I might have been seeing a double image.

“Yes?” I replied. I had just reviewed a seating chart for my civics class, and realized that the girls had to be Kari and Shari Doherty. “Aren’t you girls a little early? Class isn’t for another half hour.”

“We know,” they said in unison. Then they faced each other. The one on the left nodded to the one on the right, as if by some unspoken signal, the one on the right had been chosen as a spokesperson. “I’m Kari Doherty,” she said. “This is my sister—Shari.”

I nodded, smug in the knowledge that my assumption had been correct.

“We’ve heard that you were sent here by the government to investigate Ovid,” she began. “We’re afraid this is all our fault.”

“But how can it be your fault?” I asked, puzzled.

“Because we are Dominic Woods,” Kari replied. “We alerted the authorities about Ovid.”

“‘We’?”

They nodded together. “Yes, ma’am,” Kari said. “You see, it’s a long story...”

They managed to tell me most of it before the rest of the class wandered in. Although we had not been given the name of the person who had compiled the information that had been smuggled to us from out of Ovid, I believed the girls as their story unfolded. They spoke to me, sharing their story. One would stop and the other would begin—often within the same sentence. They filled in a lot of blanks for me, convincing me that my team had not been given all of the facts about Ovid.

From them, I heard the story of a troubled girl who, along with her parents, was swept up into the trap that was Ovid. The girl had become a young man who, due to a schizophrenic disorder had been able to fool the gods while pretending to be assimilated in Ovid and plotting its downfall.

“We regret what we did,” Shari (or at least I think it was Shari) finally told me. “It was wrong. We know now that The Judge is trying to save

us... save us all. If we had known... understood, we would not have betrayed him. We were... troubled.”

“And The Judge split you into two people?” I asked.

They nodded together. “It has allowed us to see more clearly now,” Kari insisted. “We were kept in stasis for a while until The Judge could find a way to help us.”

“That’s where we learned the truth,” Shari added.

“Wait a minute,” I protested. “How could you learn the truth while you were locked in stasis?”

“We were monitored by the Oracle,” they said together.

“And just what is the Oracle?” I asked.

In the same pattern of speaking back and forth, I learned of the Oracle of Delphi as I had never learned of it before. I recalled something I had read as a boy about the Oracle—something about a woman named Pythia who spoke prophecies which were often difficult to interpret but were never wrong. Pythia supposedly acted as a conduit for the words of the god Apollo.

“But the myths are wrong,” Shari told me.

“Pythia was a title,” Kari added. “Many women served in the role for nearly eighteen hundred years.”

“Now, no woman is required,” Shari continued. “The art of communication with the future is a talent no person remembers. While Apollo was the patron of the Oracle, his words were not the ones the Pythia spoke.”

“Then whose words were they?” I asked.

The two girls blushed. “No one knows for sure. Not even the... The Judge,” Shari said.

“But the words are always true,” Kari assured me.

“And this... Oracle spoke to you while you were in stasis?” I asked.

The girls looked at each other again. Then Kari answered, “In a way.”

“Well?” I prompted. “What did it say?”

“You need to see for yourself,” Shari replied.

“See where?”

The class bell rang before they could answer. As if by magic (not always an idle phrase in Ovid, I thought grimly), students began to filter into the classroom. There was just time for the twins to answer before leaving for their own class. “Go to Del’s,” they said together.

I had no idea what or where Del’s was, and I would be tied up for the next three hours with classes. I made a mental note to find out over the noon hour. Hopefully, it was a name I’d find in the Yellow Pages—a business. If it was just someone’s first name, I’d have a much tougher time finding it.

I was also troubled with what the twins had said about wishing they had never blown the lid on Ovid. Of course, I realized, it could be additional conditioning The Judge had given them when he changed them into what they now were. After all, their slightly stilted speech and eerie way of completing each other’s sentences were unnerving. But perhaps that was just an after-effect of the process that had split them, changing them from one unhappy being into two lovely young girls. It could also be the presumably unintentional merging of their thoughts while in stasis with the Oracle. Again, it was obvious that I had to find the Oracle.

At least the morning went by quickly. Since my hours alternated between a civics class and a geography class, then back to civics, it was a mentally stimulating morning. I found to my surprise that I had a natural knack for teaching, since both subjects were ones I could speak to from some personal experience. Maybe the automatic mode helped subtly: I can’t say for sure. Or maybe it was just that the classes were attentive and eager to participate—probably because a good number of my students remembered other lives and were thus more mature than typical middle school students. Whatever the reason or reasons, I actually enjoyed myself, although I thought I would have enjoyed myself more if I had been standing before the

class as a man rather than as an attractive woman.

It was in my third hour civics class that I spotted Kast. She walked into my classroom, surrounded by a pack of girls. All of them were dressed about the same—short skirts, big cheap jewelry, and tight little tops over small but promising bosoms. She was laughing and joking with them, her dark hair bobbing back and forth in a loose fantail. She appeared to be so well acclimated that I wondered uncomfortably if some individuals who initially remembered their former selves sometimes lost their true identities later.

As the students milled around before taking their seats, I was trying to remember the name she had been given by The Judge. At last I remembered. It was Maria. A quick confirming glance at the chart showed a Maria Lone Feather. Okay, I thought to myself as everyone settled in for class. Kast had been given an unenviable life—an Indian girl from someplace so presumably poor that her parents had to send her off to a trailer park to live with an aunt just to be in a decent school. Kast would jump at the chance to help us complete the mission and get away from Ovid. I was sure of that.

But I was wrong.

“Ms. Lone Feather,” I called out as the bell rang ending the class, “would you stay for a moment, please?”

She looked a little disappointed, but I heard one of her friends say that she would hold a place for her in the cafeteria since it was to be their lunch period.

“Yes, Ms. Leone?” she said in a sweet little voice once we were alone. The way she stood before my desk was almost enough to make me laugh. She looked so vulnerable, so like the little girl she had become. She obviously thought she had done something wrong.

“Don’t worry Kast, I know who you are,” I told her.

Her big brown eyes got even bigger. “Lieutenant Harmon?”

I suppose she had figured it out by the process of elimination. I nodded. “That’s right. And Doc is my daughter now.”

She giggled, “Sophie Leone? I met her just this morning. I had no idea...”

“Look, we need to complete our mission and get out of here,” I interrupted. “Hernandez has no idea who he—she—was and McCormick is... well, you know about McCormick.”

“Get out of here?”

“That’s right,” I confirmed. “Think of us as prisoners of war. We have to get what we came for and escape.”

She shook her head. “Why would I want to escape?”

I was puzzled. “Why? Why wouldn’t you want to escape? Look at you—you’re just a poor Indian girl off the reservation or something. Back home in Chicago, you’ve got a good life waiting for you from what I’ve heard.”

Her face shifted into an ironic little smile. “But in Chicago, I wouldn’t be a girl,” she pointed out.

She was waiting for me to say something, but I was too dumbfounded to speak. At first, I thought that her pronouncement was just one more example of mental transformation imposed by The Judge. Surely she was being made to think that she wanted to be a girl. Or perhaps she was just joking: Kast had the reputation of being something of a wiseass. What better way to pull my chain than to tell me she actually would rather be a poor minority girl rather than a rich, white man who could buy anything he wanted...

Except his sex.

There was no merriment in her eyes: only resolve. “You’re... you’re serious, aren’t you?” I stammered.

“Never more so,” she replied evenly.

“But... but you’re a SEAL,” I insisted. I could have added that Kast was not exactly an ideal SEAL, but any man who could make it through the training program and earn the eagle and trident of a SEAL was a man—a real man. No cross-dressing limp-wristed pansy could

possibly make it through the most rigorous training the US Navy could throw at him. Even the worst SEAL ever to serve—and although not ideal, Kast was far from the worst—could never be accused of being anything but a man.

“Yes, I’m a SEAL,” she agreed. “Or at least I was. Do you know why I became a SEAL?”

I shook my head.

She began, “When I was a boy growing up in Chicago, my father was determined to ‘make a man of me.’ Don’t get me wrong: I wasn’t a sissy. I just didn’t particularly like rough sports, like football or hockey, although I was pretty decent at tennis and swimming. My father had been a SEAL though, and anything less than a SEAL was a wimp in his book—including his own son.”

“So he made you go into the SEALs,” I concluded.

She cocked her head and grinned. “Made me? No one made me do anything of the sort. My father was willing to let me go on to college and eventually go into his business. You’re right about having a good life. I would have had a very good life if I had done that. But if I had, my father would have tried to run my life from then on, just as he had when I was a kid. I didn’t want any part of that. I wanted to prove to him that I was just as much of a man as he was.”

I understood all of that. I had heard similar stories before. But that still left a very big question: “So when did you decide you wanted to be a girl?”

“I’ve always wanted to be a girl,” she sighed. “Don’t look so surprised. Not all transsexuals talk with a lisp and swish through life. Some pretty manly men who don’t own a single bra or pair of panties dream quiet dreams about having breasts and a vagina. Even men who don’t probably wonder what it would be like. Haven’t you ever wondered what it would be like?”

I felt my face redden a little. Unlike Kast, I had never had any desire to be a woman, but that being said, sure, I had wondered a time or two

what women experienced during sex. Of course, that was just idle curiosity, mind you, not any real desire to be a woman.

"I can see in your face you've at least wondered about it," she said, smiling. "But with you, it was probably just a little itch—an itch too mild to even try to scratch. Don't worry, Lieutenant, I don't think you were any less of a man just for wondering what it might be like. But with me—and others like me—it isn't just a little itch. It's like poison ivy all over your body. It itches in so many places and with so much intensity that you can't scratch it without drawing blood.

"But now, for me, it doesn't itch any more. Yeah, I've lost a lot—money, power, strength. Instead of being a rich man, I'm just a poor little teenage girl. But I wouldn't trade this for ten times the wealth waiting for me back in Chicago. When I realized yesterday what The Judge was going to do to me—to 'punish' me—I nearly creamed my shorts."

I knew it was a waste of time to try to convince Kast she should join Doc and me. I didn't agree with her reasoning, but the passion with which she expressed it was too intense to refute. Oddly, I found that I wanted her to be happy with this new life she had so readily embraced. I wasn't sure if the old me—the male me—would have been quite so understanding. Perhaps I was being influenced by my new body, with all of its female hormones flowing through me. Whatever the reason, I managed to smile just a little. "I wish you well then, Maria."

She returned my smile. "Thanks." She turned to go, but then looked back at me. "You know Ms. Leone, you should maybe try to relax and be what you have been changed into. You might actually like it."

She didn't see my smile disappear. She had already turned away to join her friends in the cafeteria.

I sat silently at the teachers' table in the cafeteria, playing with a rather mediocre chef's salad. The only other teacher at the table was Ms. Frost, the science teacher, who was preoccupied with her classroom workbook. I was thinking about what Maria had just said to me—about relaxing and becoming the person I had been changed into.

As I looked around the room, I noticed among both teachers and students—a mix of shades and real people. I could count maybe fifty real kids and a half dozen real teachers and staff. Assuming that a quarter of them knew who they had been before being changed by The Judge, that meant fourteen or fifteen of them remembered previous lives. Yet I saw no discomfort from anyone. Could it be that many of them were like Kast, happy to be in new bodies? Or were they more like Doc? Doc—as Sophie—was helping me. He knew her duty. But what if I hadn't been there as a constant reminder of that duty?

She seemed to be adapting well. I spotted her at a table across the room, laughing and giggling with three other girls. She seemed confident and comfortable in who she had become—traits apparently shared by a number of others.

Yet there I was—trying my best to complete my mission, like some sort of supernatural Buzz Lightyear refusing to admit that I was just a toy. Wouldn't it be easier just to fall into line like everyone else seemed to have done? I could become just what I appeared to be—a relatively young, attractive teacher and mother—and I could snare a husband—someone like Mike who would be happy to show me how to be a woman from a horizontal position.

The problem was, I wasn't really a woman. Oh sure, my body was female, but my mind was the same male mind I had always had. I didn't feel comfortable standing around in a skirt and heels. I didn't enjoy the sensation of swinging breasts and wide hips as well as the obvious absence between my legs. And deep down, I knew why I was most uncomfortable and would never be able to relax: I was a SEAL, now and forever, and a woman could never be a SEAL.

No, I reminded myself, it wouldn't be possible for me to ever be comfortable as a woman. I would have to complete my mission, as ludicrous as it may have sounded to someone like the girl Kast had become, and get out of Ovid. Hopefully somehow somewhere, the government would find a way to get me back into the body of a man.

I had planned on trying to find this 'Del's' over the noon hour, but my

time spent with Maria had cut into my free period. I resolved to do it after school. Then, that idea was quashed when Mrs. Crabtree, the middle-aged woman I had spoken to the day before who turned out to be the principal, sent her secretary around to notify all teachers of a meeting after the class day was finished.

The meeting was strangely casual. Years of military meetings with at least a semblance of formality had left me unprepared for the casual gathering around the conference table. Everyone was on a first name basis, and it was obvious that most of the teachers were good friends. I was introduced to the staff as a new teacher for the year. A couple of the non-shade teachers gave me a knowing smile, and it was apparent to me that they were among the few teachers in the room who had been transformed and still remembered it. I made a mental note to talk with them later.

It turned out that the meeting wasn't particularly consequential. It was mostly just an opportunity for each of the teachers to bring to the table any special problems that had been noted in the first couple of days of classes. I was used to meetings where missions were planned and coordinated. The casual nature of the meeting frankly bored me—until Ms. Frost asked, “My computer is running a little slow. Does Del’s have the contract for repair again this year?”

I vaguely heard Mrs. Crabtree reply in the affirmative. So Del’s was a computer store. That made sense. A computer could dispense information just like an oracle could. In all likelihood, the Oracle was probably resident in a computer, or at least communicating through one just as it had communicated through a priestess centuries ago. I was ready to hurry over there that evening until I heard Mrs. Crabtree continue, “They’ll be closed in a few minutes, though. You’ll have to call them in the morning.”

Closed so early? Then I remembered that Ovid was a small town. Businesses closed early and employees went home to hot dinners and leisurely evenings. There were no mega-stores, with brightly-lit parking lots and late hours in small towns.

Pretending to go along with The Judge’s plans and be a teacher was

going to create some serious conflicts with my mission. Even though Ovid was a small town, it seemed as if I would have very limited time tracking down everything I needed to complete the mission. Of course, tomorrow was Friday, I realized. I doubted if there would be any special afterschool meetings then. I'd have time to get down to Ovid before the town sidewalks rolled up.

Jenny Pritchard the art teacher, stopped me on my way out after the meeting. She was one of the teachers whose expression told me that she knew what had happened to me. She smiled and said, "I just wanted to welcome you to Ovid and let you know that anything you need to help you acclimate, just let me know. The first few days in Ovid are hard for most people."

"I can imagine," I replied dryly, unconsciously glancing down at my own breasts.

"So you were male," she surmised. "Before, I mean."

"As male as they come," I confirmed. "And you?"

"Nope," she grinned. "But most women in Ovid used to be men. I think it's because more men than women tend to travel by themselves, so there aren't enough natural women showing up in Ovid to be changed. Besides, the powers here in Ovid tend to change a fair number of the women who do show up into men, just to be perverse, I suppose."

"You don't seem too upset being kidnapped and changed," I pointed out. I had noticed most people seemed to be, if not content, at least resigned to their changes.

She shrugged. "I was in a relationship back in Dallas that didn't work out. I was on the verge of suicide when I drove through Ovid on my way to visit family back in Indiana. Once I changed, I realized I had one of these." She held up her hand, showing a wedding ring. "Jack turned out to be a pretty good guy, and our relationship has been good this last year—good enough that I'm three months pregnant now."

"I wish things were that simple for me," I sighed. "Apparently, I have a boyfriend, but I'm still a guy inside."

She smiled. "Don't let that stop you. You might find you enjoy things like sex from this side."

I'm sure I turned beet red. "That's easy for you to say: you were already a woman."

"Yes," she nodded, "but not a heterosexual woman. That relationship I told you about? It was with a cute little blonde attorney who left me for another woman and I just couldn't get over her."

"You... you were gay?"

She wrinkled her brow a little. "You make it sound like a disease."

I could feel my face flushing even more. I suppose I always had sort of considered it a disease. Like many in the military—particularly in a macho discipline such as the SEALs—I had an uncomfortable feeling about gays. No, I wasn't a gay basher nor were any of the men I knew, but we just never got over the idea that gays were some sort of alien species. The idea of being attracted sexually to someone with the same equipment we had was at best repugnant and at worst downright disgusting.

"You'll get over your reluctance," she told me, as if reading my mind. "Don't look so surprised," she admonished. "It was easy to tell you used to be male, and it's easy to tell what you're thinking right now. Ask any of the women in Ovid who used to be men. They'll tell you they felt the same way you do, but they got over it. They had to. Otherwise, they'd go crazy trying to reconcile their dislike of homosexuality with their current bodies."

She had a point, I realized, after we had said our goodbyes. Here I was, stuck in the body of a woman. The idea of having sex with a man was disturbing to say the least, but if I found myself stuck forever in Ovid—stuck in this female body—how would I reconcile my reluctance to see men with my abhorrence of homosexuality? Since if I were to try to have a relationship with a woman, it would go against the physical reality I had been faced with.

I thought back on the two quick kisses I had gotten from Mike. While

neither had been particularly passionate, they had not been grossly unpleasant. Even Mike's moustache had been softer than I had anticipated, tickling my upper lip just a little, but it hadn't been unpleasant. I certainly hadn't felt my nipples tingle or gotten wet between my legs, though, either. On the whole, the experiences could be termed neutral.

On the other hand, I had seen several attractive women since my transformation and had not been turned on by them either. Perhaps I was sexually inert, interested in neither men nor women. For the time being, that was probably for the best. After all, I was still on a mission. Come to think of it, sex always scurried to the background in my mind when I was on a mission. I would just have to do my best to make sure it stayed there.

But then there was the Saturday night event Mike had alluded to. What was planned for Saturday night? Call me paranoid, but I suspected The Judge had transformed me into Gabby knowing that her boyfriend had a big evening of fun and sex planned for Saturday night. I wouldn't have been at all surprised to find I was under observation, to make sure I was playing my part properly. If sex was on the menu for Saturday and I backed out, I might find myself under more scrutiny to the point that I wouldn't be able to carry out the mission. And if I couldn't carry out my mission, I'd be trying to get out of Ovid empty-handed. Even if I managed to escape with Doc, we would be seen as failures by our superiors. Well, maybe not entirely failures since our appearances would have certainly been conclusive proof of The Judge's magical powers.

Sophie was already home when I got there. Bless her heart, she had already started dinner. "I figured you'd need something after your afternoon run," she told me as she popped a couple of chicken breasts into the oven.

"I appreciate it," I told her. "Then we can talk over dinner about the mission." Suddenly, I thought about Mike. "That is, unless Mike is coming over."

"Nope," she shook her head. "It's just us girls tonight. I suppose Mike

just figured you already knew, but the track team is at a training camp until Saturday morning.”

That was a relief. I wouldn’t have to play sweet little girlfriend for the next two nights. I suddenly realized that my new daughter had seen her mother and Mike together the day before I had been transformed. Maybe she would know how much of a girlfriend I was expected to be. “Sophie...?”

“Yes?” She looked up from the vegetables she had begun to slice.

“The night before I was transformed... Did Gabby and Mike seem to be... you know...?”

“Lovers?” she prompted.

“Well, yes.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so... At least not yet.”

“Not yet?”

“There’s a message for you on the phone,” she told me with a grin. “I didn’t listen to too much of it...”

“Liar!”

“Hi, Gabby,” Mike’s voice on the message greeted me. “We’re just getting ready to leave for Norman for the camp. If you need me, try my cell number. I can’t tell you how much I miss you already, honey. But I guess it will just make Saturday that much sweeter for us. I love you, Gabby.”

The message ended while I just stood there with the phone glued to my ear. Love? Oh shit, it was worse than I thought. “Sophie, what is he talking about? What’s happening Saturday?”

“Well, starting tomorrow afternoon, I’ll be at a Girl Scout camp until Sunday, so I guess you and Mike have something really, really big planned.”

“Quit that grinning!” I demanded. “Do you realize he probably means to f... I mean se... Oh crap! You know what I mean.”

She looked at me slyly as she pulled out a head of lettuce for the beginnings of a salad. “So why not just lie back and enjoy it?”

My eyes widened. “Are you crazy? I’m not a woman—not in my head at least. I don’t want some guy...”

“Doing to you what you’ve done to them?”

“Exactly!”

She sighed as she chopped. “Well, Mom, do you think the women you made love to didn’t enjoy it?”

“What?”

She looked up at me from her finely-chopped lettuce. “Do you think they enjoyed it?” she repeated.

“I... I suppose so,” I managed.

She nodded. “Then why shouldn’t you enjoy it, too?”

It was a valid question: I had to admit that to myself. The problem was, I didn’t like the answer. The answer was that I was just a little afraid that I might enjoy it.

Sophie shooed me off to get in my run while she finished dinner. I was pleased to note that I had less trouble running than I had with Mike. Maybe it just felt good to get out of that skirt and heels and dress in something more familiar. Well, the shoes were more familiar anyhow, although the sports bra and tight little running shorts didn’t feel all that normal.

I got a fair number of stares from the folks I passed—most of them were men, so you can imagine what kind of stares I was getting. Even the shades took their time watching as I jiggled (there seems no other word for it) down the sidewalk at a conservative pace.

I tried as I ran to remember what it had been like to run as a man. My male body had been stronger and possessed a greater stride. I seemed to be running so slowly now that as a man, I wouldn’t have even called it ‘running.’ The only advantage I seemed to have picked up was agility. At no time could I remember being as flexible as a man

as I was in this feminine body.

I put in roughly two miles, huffing as I walked back into the house to be assailed by the smell of roast chicken in some unidentifiable herbs.

“Where did you learn to cook?” I asked, savoring the appetizing aromas.

“I told you I had three sisters, remember?” Sophie said, dishing up some rice to go with the chicken which had already been placed artfully on the plates. “Mom always insisted that all of us learn to cook. She said it was important for my sisters to cook well to please their husbands.”

“So why did she want you to know how to cook?” I pressed.

She sat down across the table from me. “So I wouldn’t be forced to marry the first woman who could cook,” she replied primly. “It worked too well, though. I never got around to getting married.”

“Uh... but you liked girls, didn’t you?”

“Of course I liked girls,” she huffed.

I suppose the question was out of line, but after Kast’s shocking admission, I was beginning to wonder if Doc hadn’t swung that way as well. As Sophie, she seemed to have little trouble adapting to her new life. Of course, it was easier for her, I thought. She didn’t have to worry about dressing in a skirt and heels every day, and she didn’t have a boyfriend sniffing around like I did. She could just be a happy-go-lucky teen while I had to play the adult role.

“Let’s discuss the mission,” I suggested, changing the subject.

“Over dessert,” she countered. “I don’t want the chicken to get cold.”

I nodded, digging into the chicken. It tasted as good as it smelled, and I vowed to let Sophie do all of the cooking until we got out of Ovid.

Dessert was simple by comparison—vanilla ice cream with fresh peaches, but I found it very satisfying. I had noticed that my capacity for food had been greatly reduced in this new body, but my sense of taste had actually been enhanced. I didn’t think that was necessarily a

sexual characteristic, but it drove home once more the fact that I was now an entirely different person.

When we finished, I loaded the dishes while telling Sophie what I had learned during the day.

"I'm not surprised about Kast," she said as we finished cleaning up the kitchen.

"You're not?"

She shook her head. "No. He seemed to have the ability to be a SEAL, but not the desire."

"So you're saying that without the desire, he was just a pussy," I joked.

She shot me a look of mock irritation. "I'm just not surprised is all I'm saying. But that story the twins told you... that's promising. Maybe we should go by this Del's now."

"I'm sure they're closed," I replied. "We're not talking about a big city computer store. Most small towns close up early."

"Yeah, but we can drive by and take a look," she suggested. "If anybody sees us, just tell them we're window shopping for a computer for me."

"But you have a computer..."

"Sure," she grinned, "but anybody who asks us won't know that."

In just a few minutes, we had checked the address in the phone book. The shop was on the unimaginatively-named Main Street. It was only five minutes away. Of course in a town as small as Ovid, just about everything was only about five minutes away.

It was still light, although the sun was down when we got out of the car in front of Del's. As computer stores went, it wasn't much. A small red and white sign proclaimed it to be a *Radio Shack* agency store, and the windows displayed a small selection of computers, their monitors cheerfully displaying a variety of demo programs.

“This is where the Oracle is kept?” Sophie said, shaking her head. “It doesn’t look like much to me.”

I was about to agree when I heard the click of heels waking toward us along the otherwise deserted sidewalk. I turned to see what appeared to be a mother and her young son approaching us. The mother appeared tall and attractive in the waning light, and her son was a boy of perhaps eight or so. Sophie and I waited for them to pass, but it was quickly apparent that their destination was the same as ours. Just our luck, I thought.

My blood suddenly ran cold as I realized who the ‘mother’ was. Blonde hair and icy blue eyes resolved themselves into the most prominent features of Freda Jorgenson’s beautiful face.

No, she wasn’t exactly Freda in appearance, but I knew at once who she was. From Sophie’s expression, I could see that she knew as well. Her face, although still beautiful, had been altered subtly, and only those of us who would have had reasons to remember her well would have been able to identify her. But how had she managed such alterations? Certainly not by plastic surgery, I realized, or her face would still be swollen and discolored. It was as if...

It was as if she wielded power to alter her appearance, much like the power of The Judge.

As that thought rippled through my mind, I realized she was staring intently at us, as if trying to determine who we were. I suppose we should have identified ourselves, thinking that this was still part of our mission, but both Sophie and I said nothing—primarily because the look on Freda Jorgenson’s face was not a pleasant one. She looked at Sophie and me as if we were insects—below her very notice. This was not the Freda Jorgenson the world knew as advisor to presidents: this was something else—something powerful in ways few humans could ever imagine.

Gently, I put my hand against Sophie’s back and guided her away from the woman and her juvenile companion before she became too curious. As she observed us departing, she directed her ward’s

attention to the window, pointing to something inside. The child, I could see as I glanced back, nodded silently.

“Do you know who that is?” Sophie whispered to me once we had walked perhaps a block.

“Yes,” I replied. “It’s Jorgenson.”

“And the child is Steele,” she added.

“What?”

“It’s Steele,” she affirmed. “He’s been transformed into a child, but I can tell it’s him.”

I had been concentrating so heavily on the woman that I hadn’t paid much attention to the child. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” she answered. “He has the same color eyes, hair, skin tone, and if you look at him carefully, you can see an adult presence behind those eyes. Do you think they’re working with The Judge?”

I shook my head. “I doubt it. Otherwise, why would The Judge be so insistent that we tell him where Steele was—if you’re right about the kid being Steele.”

“Then that means...” she began.

“It means The Judge isn’t the only one who can transform people,” I finished for her.

“But Jorgenson works for the Administration. Our own government has the power to do what the g... g...” she choked, then recovered, “...The Judge can do?”

“I don’t think so,” I replied. “I think there’s another player in all of this—a player with the same powers The Judge has.”

“Suddenly, we’ve got more questions,” Sophie sighed.

I nodded in agreement. We certainly had more questions but no more answers. Something told me that the mission was becoming more complex by the minute.

One thing I learned the next day was that teachers anticipate the

weekend at least as much as students do. Everyone—students and faculty alike—seemed more interested in the high school football game that night or the football game at Capta College the next day than they were in Friday's lessons. I had noticed that morning that even I—or the 'I' who had existed in this role before my transformation—had written down the Capta College game on the calendar hanging on my refrigerator. Apparently that was to be part of my day with Mike.

I hoped with all my heart that the game was all Mike had been referring to in his references to Saturday, but then I recalled that the game would be in the afternoon and Mike had specifically referred to Saturday night. I had a sneaky hunch that Mike was planning a sleepover at my house that night, and not the sort of sleepover where you told scary stories and watched TV until dawn.

I actually looked forward to my classes that day. Every minute spent before a class was one less minute I spent worrying about Saturday night. In the scheme of things, I suspected Mike and Gabby were obviously expected to be having sex whenever Sophie was safely out of the way, such as her weekend Girl Scout outing. But if I was to continue the illusion that I was content to be a happy Ovid resident, I might have to actually go through with a lovemaking session.

What would it be like to make love as a woman? I wasn't anxious to find out. The thought of lying on my back with my legs spread while some guy poked into me wasn't high on my list of things to do.

Perhaps, I thought, Sophie and I should have said something to Freda Jorgenson the night before and tried to reattach ourselves to the mission. Then I could have probably avoided any time in the sack with Mike. The problem was, as Sophie and I both saw it, we weren't really sure Freda was on the same mission we were.

I was in turmoil over what to do, and I think Sophie was as well. Freda Jorgenson was a top official with our government, and by all rights, we should have submitted ourselves to her authority. But what held us back was the near certainty that no one in our government could have done what Freda had done to herself, let alone what had been done to Steele. No, the best thing we could do was to try to carry out our

original mission and assume that Freda Jorgenson was a rogue agent working for some power as ominous as that of The Judge.

“Don’t do anything rash without me,” Sophie cautioned as I helped her with her backpack.

“I won’t,” I promised. “What have you got in here—lead weights?”

“Actually it’s a lot lighter than anything we used to have to carry,” she told me, adjusting the straps on her pack until it fit more snugly. “The problem is just that we’re both a lot weaker now.”

“That’s for sure,” I grumped. I had practically sprained my wrist that morning just trying to open a jug of grape juice.

“And have fun with Mike,” she called back to me with a grin as she headed off for the bus. She was too far away for me to say what I wanted to say and stay in character.

That evening, I felt oddly alone. It was funny, because I had never been a terribly social person before, as my ex-wife would have surely been happy to testify—if she even remembered me. The house seemed lonesome with Sophie gone, and I began to realize just how much I enjoyed her presence. After my evening run, I decided to go out and get something to eat rather than stare at the walls in my own kitchen.

I ended up at a place called Rusty’s, which looked as if it might have a decent burger. I felt almost normal as I got out of my car to go into Rusty’s. I was wearing jeans and a light sweater, and sneakers, so it almost felt as if I was dressed as a man again. Or at least it would have if it hadn’t been for the purse tucked under my right arm and the slightly constricting feeling of my bra.

I had just entered when an attractive brunette seated with a young toddler motioned me over and called out, “Gabby, come sit with me. Are you batching tonight, too?”

“Uh... yeah,” I replied. I didn’t hesitate to join her, though. I craved company.

When I got closer, her beautiful eyes shot up in surprise. “You’re...

real.”

“So?”

She thought for a moment and thrust out her hand. “Susan Jager. And this little guy is Joshua.” The boy smiled from his high chair.

She had a strong handshake—almost like a man. “I’m... well, I guess you already know who I am—or at least who I’m supposed to be.”

“Yes,” she said with interest. “But more importantly, who were you before?”

A waitress came up and took my drink order, so I had a few moments to reflect on just how much I wanted to tell this woman. Her interest seemed more than casual, as if something had happened to me that wasn’t exactly supposed to happen. After I had ordered an iced tea, I decided to put a question to her first.

“Why the surprise? I thought things like this happened all the time here.”

“They do,” she admitted, as she managed to tuck a bib on the squirming boy who was doing his best to get out of the high chair. “Or at least transformations do, but not the way it was done to you. It’s just that I had The Judge’s assurances that everyone coming into Ovid would be subject to due process.”

“Well, I don’t remember anyone reading me my Miranda rights,” I told her drolly.

She looked me in the eye. “I’m going to try to talk to you about this, but there are rules in Ovid. I may not be able to say some things because three people can’t talk about them at the same time. I’m guessing that Joshua is too young to understand and won’t be taken into account in our conversation, okay?”

I nodded. It turned out she was right. The only limit imposed on our conversation came when the waitress would approach our table.

Susan went on to explain to me her role in Ovid as a defense attorney, practicing before The Judge to mitigate his stern sense of justice. “I try

to make him understand we're only human," she explained. "He sets people to a very high standard, so more than one petty criminal who has strayed into Ovid can probably thank me for preserving his humanity."

"Yet neither I nor my men were given any chance at a defense," I pointed out. I proceeded to tell her a highly-edited version of our mission by explaining that we were a team sent by the government to investigate allegations of people being forced to live in Ovid.

"That's certainly the case," she admitted. "But to be fair, most of us settle into pretty happy lives here. I, for one, am far happier here than I ever was as an attorney out in the real world." Then she looked rather wistful. "But I do sometimes miss my Lexus."

"That's not what I miss," I groused.

"What?" Then a look of understanding crossed her face and she laughed. "Oh! Of course. You were a man. I see what you mean."

"Do you?"

She grabbed my hand and squeezed gently. "More than you could ever imagine. I was a man once too, you know."

"And suddenly, you found yourself a woman with a young child," I supplied.

She laughed again. "Oh no! The child came later."

I must have had a very stricken look on my face. "You... gave birth to him?"

She nodded, smiling.

"Then you must have had..." I stammered. "I mean you must..."

"As often as I can," she acknowledged, the smile becoming wider.

I had that thought to chew on as our meals arrived.

"Listen, Gabby," she suggested after swallowing a dainty mouthful of her burger, "sex as a woman is just different. It's still sex."

"But with a man?" I blurted out, nearly losing the bite of what I had to

admit was a delicious burger.

She smiled devilishly. "It seems to work better that way."

"Susan," I asked, trying desperately to change the subject, "why do you think we weren't given a chance to defend ourselves in court?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure, but I can guess. The Judge has been very touchy the last week or so. It was bad enough when he learned that a disc had been smuggled out of Ovid with valuable intelligence about his operation here, but last week, he was even worse."

"How do you know?" I asked. "Was he changing people into field mice or something?"

"He hasn't done that in some time," she replied absently, causing me to cringe involuntarily. "No, actually no one new has been allowed into Ovid since the disc was taken out. Oh, people still pass through, and a few new residents have moved into town—all Vulman employees—but no one has been before The Judge for some time now."

"Except me and my men," I sighed.

"I think The Judge had a plan to combat any incursion caused by the disc," she confided softly. "But something went seriously wrong with his plan—something unforeseen."

"You may be right," I acknowledged, deciding instantly that Susan could be a valuable resource. I decided to confide in her—at least to the point of explaining how Steele had not made the mission. I didn't tell her about seeing Jorgenson and Steele earlier at Del's.

"So Steele didn't make the jump," Susan repeated. "Then The Judge changed all of you because you wouldn't tell him about Steele?"

"Um-hum," I agreed with a mouthful of burger. It really was a great sandwich and I was hungry.

"Why would he be so worried about Steele?" Susan asked as she gave Joshua another drink of milk.

"He's an explosives expert," I replied.

Susan looked worried. “You think he might have made it into Ovid alone prepared to blow something up?” she asked.

“It’s possible,” I admitted. It was something worth worrying about. Steele was about the best demolitions expert in the entire Navy. What if Jorgenson had brought him into Ovid to blow something up? And what was important enough to destroy?

Maybe it was Del’s. After all, the Oracle was there. Or was it? So far as I knew, the Oracle might just be speaking through a computer terminal. The Oracle might still be back in Greece with a network connection into Del’s. Still, it would explain why I saw him with Jorgenson in front of the store.

How about City Hall? Steele’s explosion might catch The Judge, Officer Mercer, and possibly another god or two. But could a C-4 explosion destroy a god? I rather doubted it. Perhaps Vulman was the target. Something important was going on there—something big enough that even with the embargo on new transformees, new employees were being allowed to move into town to work in Vulman’s secret labs.

I needed Susan’s advice, but how much could I tell her? There was one way to find out. “Susan, here in Ovid, does The Judge respect attorney-client privilege?”

“In general, yes.”

“Then how would you like to be my attorney?”

She frowned. “Why do you need an attorney? If you’ve done something to anger The Judge that you haven’t told me, I don’t think I’ll be able to help you much.”

“No,” I sighed, “it’s nothing like that.”

So after she agreed to represent me, I told her everything. It bothered me to do so in ways that are difficult to explain. I have always been loyal to my country and always will be, but something wasn’t adding up in this mission. We had been denied the very intel we needed to complete the mission. Now, Jorgenson and Steele were in Ovid, and I

had no idea what—or whose—mission they were on.

I supposed it was possible that they had been sent in once we had failed to report back. But if that were the case, they were a very unlikely pair to be inserted into Ovid. Jorgenson wasn't a field operative. She had no experience in covert operations, except presumably as a desk jockey. As for Steele, he was a specialist. It was up to others such as the man I had been to get him in close to the target. He lacked the intelligence-gathering skills a mission like ours would have demanded.

"The Judge needs to know about this," Susan concluded when I had finished my story.

"But you said I could give you privileged information," I reminded her, shocked at her suggestion. I had no desire to face The Judge again. Heaven only knew what he might change me into the next time I saw him. I might be female now, but at least I was a human female of a reasonable age.

Susan read my expression of fear and placed her hand on mine.

"Don't worry, Gabby. This time I'll be there with you as your attorney. You asked me to be your attorney, and as such, I have to recommend to you that you tell all of this to The Judge. I don't think The Judge will do anything to you. After all, you are helping him by telling what you know."

"All... all right," I agreed reluctantly. "When do we see him?"

"Right now," she replied.

As I climbed into Susan's little Toyota, I began to have second thoughts. Just because I hadn't been told about any plan to insert Jorgenson and Steele into Ovid didn't mean it wasn't part of a sanctioned operation. Granted, it wasn't acceptable procedure on the surface of things, but more than one operation I had participated in had required compartmentalization. Since our whole operation had been the result of being seconded to NSA, it was hard to tell if what was going on was normal operating procedure or not.

But I had my doubts. If our entire operation had been nothing more than a smoke screen to make the gods think we had executed a flawed mission and gotten ourselves caught to boot, that meant a team of good operatives had been needlessly sacrificed. That wasn't the sort of strategy that made men willing to put themselves at extreme risk. It made it appear as if we had been set up—lied to—just to disguise the real nature of the mission.

Besides, I had to operate on the orders I had been given. I had been told to gather information on Ovid and get out as soon as possible. I hadn't been told that there was a second mission—or that our own government had the power to change an adult into a child. Maybe what I was doing would get me closer to The Judge and help me to get the very information that would complete my mission. I still believed that Jorgenson was on a rogue mission, and compromising her and Steele would do nothing to compromise my own mission.

Maybe this was all a rationalization, I told myself as we pulled into the City Hall parking lot, but I was tired of being a pawn—and a taken pawn at that—in this game. The only way I could get back into the game was to see The Judge.

Officer Mercer and The Judge were waiting for us in chambers. Susan had contacted him as she drove us over to City Hall. For Officer Mercer as Mercury, the trip would have only taken an instant. As ruler of the gods, I suspected The Judge was every bit as fast. Both of them were dressed exactly as they had been when I was transformed, and both of them wore disapproving looks as they saw Susan and me together.

“Just what is this about?” The Judge demanded, not bothering to rise from behind his desk.

“My client,” Susan began, emphasizing my relationship to her, “has information which may be of great value to your efforts.” She said it so calmly I suspected she was one hell of an attorney. She didn't seem to be intimidated by the gods at all.

“And what does your client want in return?” The Judge asked,

reserving a stony stare for me.

What did I want? I hadn't really given it much thought. What I really wanted was Jorgenson and Steele's activities curbed so that I could get on with my own mission. But perhaps there was a chance to complete my mission and get out of Ovid before Mike got me alone Saturday night.

"Your Honor," I began, "our mission poses no direct threat to you and your... associates—assuming that you have no hostile intentions yourselves. If you could change my team back to normal and provide us with assurances of peaceful intent, we would be willing to pass that on to our people."

The Judge smiled, but it was a grim smile. "Ms. Leone, you really have no idea how complex this matter is. Had things gone according to our plan, none of this would have happened. You and your team would have been held in reserve until our immediate plans were accomplished. That was Admiral Nepper's mission. Unfortunately, we have discovered that Admiral Nepper is being held incommunicado and a new and dangerous enemy has surfaced, about whom we know very little."

"That doesn't justify changing people without a trial," Susan pointed out.

"Your own President Lincoln established a similar precedent when he suspended habeas corpus," The Judge shot back. "Make no mistake about it, Susan, we are at war—just as surely as your nation was when Mr. Lincoln took his actions."

"Maybe if you explained what is happening, my client could help," she returned.

Anger which had been growing in The Judge's face seemed to abate, as if he was honestly considering Susan's proposal. At last, he nodded. "Very well. I will explain this much to both of you. The Oracle has determined that the human race has no more than a few decades left before it destroys itself and us with it. Before this era, we had no concerns about your infantile conflicts—until at last, you developed

weapons powerful enough to destroy even our kind.”

“Nuclear weapons,” I suggested. So this was what the twins wanted me to understand from the Oracle.

He turned to me. “Exactly. In Japan at the close of your Second World War, several of our kind were obliterated by nuclear weapons. It was at that time that we were forced to take a more active interest in human affairs or face extinction as well. We assumed human identities and ingratiated ourselves to a number of your world leaders.

Eisenhower, McMillan, de Gaulle, even Khrushchev and Chairman Mao received our advice as we sought to temper the human lust for war. In the end, all saw that we were correct and the world was safe—for the moment.

“Then things started to fall apart. Social systems began to collapse and alliances waned, leaving the world with a number of new groups with potential access to nuclear weapons, but unlike the more mature nations we were able to influence, these new groups cannot be dissuaded from using such weapons in the name of their causes. It is only a matter of a few more years before a religious war of apocryphal proportions grows from the actions of these groups and destroys all that your species has achieved.”

“The Middle East,” I murmured.

“Right again,” The Judge acknowledged.

“And you have a plan to stop it,” I prompted.

“A plan which the discovery of Ovid would render useless,” he replied.

We were all silent for a minute, until at last I asked, “And you expect us to take your word for all of that on faith?”

As I remember, more than one of the ancient Greeks cautioned that it was unwise to anger the gods. I realized the moment I had spoken that I would have been wise to remember that dictum. In spite of his modern dress, I could just for a moment imagine The Judge’s face surrounded by roiling clouds filled with menace and destructive power. He glared at me with the coldest blue eyes I had ever seen. As I

glanced away, I saw that even Officer Mercer looked vaguely uncomfortable from behind his enigmatic mirrored sunglasses.

“Your Honor,” Susan began, bravely stepping in front of me, “I don’t think she meant...”

“I know exactly what she meant,” The Judge growled, his eyes still fixed on me. “How dare you doubt my words! I have told you more than I have told any other mortal. I sought to make you understand the urgency of bringing our plan back on track. Instead, you want proof, do you? Then here is your proof!”

In an instant, I was somewhere else—some when else as well, I realized. I recognized the place—it was Michigan Avenue in the heart of Chicago’s famed Loop. But it was a Chicago which I prayed silently would never exist. Instead of crowds of bustling people and lines of slowly moving cars, the street was deserted. Oh, there were cars—or what was left of them—burning wrecks strewn in all directions, as if they were toys thrown there by a careless child. The twisted remains of Chicago’s magnificent skyline burned and smoked, filling the sky with acrid smoke, blotting out the sun as ashes swirled in a firestorm-created wind.

The heat was intense—fatal if I had actually been there, but something told me I was not really there in corporeal form. But as intense as the heat was, it was positively cool from what it had been, as evidenced by the powdery silhouettes on the sides of the building—the last evidence of what had once been living humans, vaporized by the intense power of a nuclear weapon.

Yes, it could have all been some sort of special effects, created by the gods and placed in my mind to frighten me into submission, but I had seen war. I had studied the aftermath of thermonuclear destruction. What I was experiencing was real—or would be some day.

“This is just a foretaste,” the voice of The Judge came from behind me. I turned to see him standing there with me, the fires of the hell that had once been Chicago reflected in his gold-rimmed glasses. “Already Boston, San Francisco, and a host of other American cities

have suffered similar fates.”

“What of the enemy?” I asked softly.

He shook his head. “There is not one city still in Moslem control. Vast areas of the Middle East have been rendered uninhabitable for centuries. Not that it matters. The cloud of radiation now surrounding the planet will kill all but a few of the remaining humans within the next five years, even if the remaining nuclear weapons still at the ready are not detonated.”

“And you can stop this?” I asked softly, averting my eyes from the horror before me.

“We can try,” he replied. “Nothing is certain.”

I nodded. I understood at last what the fate of my race would be unless The Judge was allowed to proceed. “I’ll do what I can. Get me away from here. I’ve seen enough.”

“Are you all right?” Susan asked.

I was standing exactly as I had been before. “I... what happened?”

“Your eyes glazed over and you stiffened,” she told me. “I was afraid The Judge had done something to you.”

I looked into The Judge’s eyes. “I suppose he did.”

The Judge made no move to explain to Susan what had happened. I looked around as I heard a door close to see Officer Mercer still standing there. “What did you find?” The Judge asked.

“I’ve checked the entire town,” Officer Mercer replied. “There is no sign of either Mr. Steele or Ms. Jorgenson.”

The Judge’s eyes narrowed. “Ms. Leone, are you certain you saw them?”

“Of course I’m sure!” I snapped. “Why would I lie?”

“Actually, I can think of several reasons you might lie,” The Judge responded drolly. “But I do know that you are telling the truth.”

I suppose he did. After all, no god worth his salt would lack the ability

to tell when any mere mortal was lying to him—or so I thought. “Maybe they changed their shapes,” I suggested.

“Possible,” The Judge agreed, “but not likely. Shifting the shape of others so quickly is not a common ability—even among the gods.”

“Are you saying Jorgenson is a g... g...” The Judge waved his hand, allowing me to gasp out the final word: “...god?”

“It’s very likely,” he replied. “But she isn’t one of our pantheon. That is what makes her and her allies so dangerous. We can only guess at what powers are arrayed against us.”

“Not exactly godly powers if she needed an explosives expert,” I pointed out, noting to myself that The Judge had all but said that Jorgenson was some sort of deity.

“Unless she wanted to make it look as if humans were allied with them,” The Judge mused.

I could see his point. If the gods believed that the government of the United States had discovered them and made some sort of alliance with another faction of gods, it could be enough to make The Judge uproot his operation in Ovid and move to some presumed safer location. That, coupled with any damage Steele managed to cause would effectively derail whatever plan the gods had devised to stop the march toward a devastating world war.

It’s been said that man plans and the gods laugh, but maybe every now and then, it happens the other way around: gods plan and man laughs. What Jorgenson could never have anticipated was that I would chance upon her and Steele as they reconnoitered the town, or that I would have effectively defied my orders and contacted The Judge. The first error I could forgive her for since it was mere chance that caused our paths to cross. As for the second error, it irritated me that she would think me such a martinet that I would remain loyal to my mission after discovering her betrayal of my team. Because of her, five good men had been rendered ineffective—all changed into girls with one even losing his sense of identity.

The Judge dismissed us and Susan drove me back to Rusty's to pick up my car. "You were wise not to push The Judge for anything tonight," she told me. "I think he respected your ethics in this matter."

"But I would really like to have asked him something," I sighed. As we drove along Ovid's nearly-deserted streets. "I would really like to be changed back into a man before tomorrow."

"What's happening tomorrow?" she asked.

I was hesitant to tell Susan of my apprehensions about the coming day with Mike, but who would understand what I was going through better than Susan? While she was now apparently content to be a wife and a mother, there must have been a time after her transformation when she felt as reluctant as I was to face the possibility of having sex with a man.

"Is that all?" she laughed when I had told her.

I flushed, wondering what she could possibly find so funny. Had she been gay as a man? I couldn't imagine any red-blooded American man who, finding himself transformed into a woman, would willfully spread his—or rather her—legs for any man. Even if time and hormones altered his mind, surely it would take more than a few days to become comfortable with the thought.

Now that my mission was, for all practical purposes, ended with Jorgenson's apparent betrayal, I no longer felt the need to continue pretending to be content with my new feminine role. All that remained for me now was to let Mike down easily. I did like the guy. If I were still a man, he was the sort of guy I would like to drink beer with and talk about the prospects for the Bengals or the Reds.

But as much as I liked Mike, he was a man. I had been where he was before—dating a girl and expecting her to put out after a suitable interval of courtship. What would I have done if the girl had backed away just before the big day? I like to think I would have been a gentleman and accepted the girl's refusal, but would Mike?

I had known guys who could be nice as you please to their girls—until

something rubbed them the wrong way. I had even sat on a court martial where a sailor faced with that very situation had made the wrong decision and found himself up on very serious charges. According the testimony, he was a good kid who friends would never have dreamed would ever be up on rape and assault charges.

Actually, I didn't think Mike was the type who would force me, but there was something about finding myself in a small, defenseless female body that made even the possibility of a sexual assault something to worry about. Granted, I could probably defend myself—to a point. All of my hand-to-hand combat skills depended upon my male strength and balance. I might just anger a determined man. A little bit of unfamiliar fear crossed my mind.

It must have shown on my face, too. Susan had parked next to my car and was looking at my face with new concern. "You really are worried about this, aren't you?" she asked.

I just nodded, afraid that my voice would tremble with my new fear.

Susan put her arm around me. "Look Gabby, I think I know someone who can help."

"Help? How?" I asked in a quavering voice.

"Tomorrow morning before the game, go down to March's Department Store and ask for Vera March. She can help you sort this out."

"Wait a minute!" I said. "I know who she is. She was mentioned in the briefing. If I see her, she'll have me turned into a bitch in heat. Mike won't have to do anything: I'll probably do it all for him!"

"I'll call her first thing," she promised. "I'll tell her how you're helping The Judge. Vera will understand, Gabby. She's not like The Judge. She's a woman too, after all."

Too.

What a horrid thought, but it was true. Reluctantly I nodded. "Okay. I'll see her."

And see her I did. March's Department Store was a throwback to a kinder, gentler time. In an era where downtown department stores struggled even in the heart of large urban centers, March's was obviously doing well, judging by the number of customers I saw milling about the store. The building was only three stories tall, and each floor was a fraction of the size of the typical suburban Nordstrom's, but the stock looked new and up to date and was well displayed.

I made my way into the women's clothing department, feeling as out of place as I had when I had been inserted into Angola a few years back. This was unfamiliar territory for me and always had been. During my brief and stormy marriage, my wife had dragged me into the women's department a few times, and I always felt like a fish out of water. Unfortunately, now that I had the type of body that could actually wear the garments I saw displayed around me, I felt even more uncomfortable. The reason? I suddenly realized that I would be coming into stores like this for the rest of my life, trying on and buying skirts and heels and cosmetics. It was a sobering thought.

"Can I help you?"

I turned to see a young woman, smartly dressed, smiling at me. She appeared to be a few years younger than I—probably no more than twenty—with long brown hair and a perky crop of freckles. "I'm Donna Gorman," she said. "Is there something in particular you'd like to see?"

I gather my wits and replied, "Yes, I'd like to see Vera March. Susan Jager sent me."

Donna's mouth turned up into a bemused smile. I blushed a little, as I had the sudden suspicion that she knew exactly why I wanted to see Vera March. Well, there was no turning back, though. I'd just have to suffer through the embarrassment.

Donna took my arm. "Don't worry. A lot of us have to see Vera sooner or later. She's nice: you'll like her."

As Donna ushered me into Vera's office, I wasn't sure if I would like her, but if I had been in my old male body, there were a number of things I would like to do with her. To say that she was the most

beautiful woman I had ever seen would not have been an exaggeration. As she rose and came around her desk to greet me, extending a perfect hand, I realized for the first time exactly why extremely attractive women are called goddesses. Donna was actually quite attractive, but next to Vera March, she looked like a boy.

"Susan told me you'd be dropping by," Vera told me, squeezing my hand with a firm while feminine handshake. "I'm very pleased you came."

She was pleased. I nearly shuddered in pleasure that she was pleased. "I... uh..." I began as Donna excused herself with a smile and left.

She motioned for me to sit next to her on a nearby couch. When I was comfortable, she gazed at me serenely for a moment. Then, she frowned. While even her frown was beautiful, I had to ask, "Is something wrong?"

"You seem a little hard to read," she replied, but I knew what she really meant was that she couldn't read my mind. Strange, The Judge seemed to have the same problem. From what I knew of the gods, any one of them should have been able to read my mind with little or no effort at all.

"Still, your emotions are easy to read," she continued.

Well Donna had said she had helped others in my position. "I... I think I'm expected to have sex tonight," I admitted reluctantly. "I just can't... I can't do it."

"Why not?" she asked calmly.

"You know why," I shot back. "This isn't who I am." I motioned with my hands at my woman's body. "I'm a man—at least inside I'm still a man. I can't have sex with another man. It's... it's just plain sick!"

"Would it be all right if you were to make love to a woman?" she probed.

I had no immediate answer for that. My mind wanted to say yes, but I was in the body of a woman. It might be kind of fun to watch some

skin flick where two women go at each other, but the thought of being one of those women seemed somehow unnatural to me now.

“Answer the question,” she insisted.

I seemed compelled to respond. “No, I mean I don’t think I should—not like this.”

“Then what is it you want?”

“Can you change me back into a man?” I asked hopefully, clutching at straws.

She shook her head, a little smile of amusement on her lips. “Why would you ever want to be a man?”

I didn’t bother to answer, nor did she seem to expect me to. After a few moments of silence, she rose. “I’m sorry then, Gabriella, but there seems to be nothing I can do for you...”

“No, wait!” I begged. “You have to help me. Susan said...”

“Susan is a very intelligent woman,” Vera interrupted, “but she apparently overestimated your own intelligence.”

“What?”

“You are what you are,” she said, sitting next to me once more. “You are a woman. No matter what your mind tells you, you have been made into a lovely young woman, and by your own moral code, women should make love to men.”

“But I’m a man inside!”

“If it were the other way around and you had a woman’s mind in a man’s body, would it then be all right for you to ignore women in favor of liaisons with men?”

I thought suddenly of Kast. He had shocked me with his admission that he preferred to be a woman, presumably with all that entailed.

“But what can I do?” I moaned.

“Do you like this man?” she asked gently.

I nodded. “He’s a good guy. He could be a good friend.”

She returned my nod. “Lovers should always be friends before they become lovers. Don’t you agree?”

Again, I nodded, feeling embarrassing tears welling up in my eyes.

“Physical love is a further manifestation of a deep friendship,” she explained. “While pleasurable in the physical sense, it is an ultimate expression of trust. For a woman to allow a man to enter her, she must feel the man is worthy of her friendship and her trust. Is this man worthy of your friendship?”

“Y... yes,” I stammered, my voice soft and trembling. I was feeling something within my new body that I had never felt before, but I couldn’t quite understand it. It was a little like the feeling I had experienced when I had held Mike’s hand during our walk, but much more demanding.

“Is he worthy of your trust?”

Did I trust Mike? He had certainly never given me any reason not to trust him. I nodded again as the strange feeling seemed to warm my inner being.

“Then you know what to do,” she concluded in a soothing voice.

Yes. Yes, I did know what to do. My conscious mind—my male mind—seemed to recede in the wake of the warm glow. I didn’t even remember leaving Vera’s office.

Just because Vera March did whatever she did to give me the warm fuzzies about Mike didn’t mean that I didn’t have a care in the world about what might be expected of me. First, I had been so focused on finding a solution to Mike’s expected advances that I had not taken into account that after my revelation to The Judge, my mission was most certainly over. I really didn’t need to deal with Mike’s advances. I could simply tell him no and let him walk away.

The problem was that I wasn’t sure I wanted that to happen. In the few days I had been in Ovid, I had found Mike to be a true friend. We had discussed many things together—things that interested both of us. I really didn’t have any other friends to speak of. Oh, a couple of the

teachers had been friendly, and Susan appeared to be a good friend, but that was it. And besides, Susan had a family—a husband and a son—who took up much of her time. Well, there was Sophie too, but she had interests of her own—interests that did not include her mother. And yes, in retrospect, I realized she was starting to treat me as if I really was her mother. She even seemed a little reluctant to talk about our previous lives and was beginning to focus on her new one. That left Mike.

Even if I had been the person I appeared to be—that is to say born and raised a female—I would probably have had some misgivings about Mike, I realized. Here I was, a single woman—a widow no less—with a teenaged daughter to raise. From my experience as a man, I found women such as the one I had become to be a little suspicious of men. Questions such as ‘will he be a good father to my child?’ and ‘how will he compare to my first husband?’ would come to mind. Of course, I had no way of answering that second question, but the trepidation I showed could easily be interpreted as that by someone like Mike.

So even a real, lifelong woman would probably have visible concerns. As for me, those concerns would be magnified. I had already come to the reluctant conclusion that I was going to be a woman for the rest of my life. In the briefings, I hadn’t heard of a single person who had been changed back. I was doomed to be a woman from now on: it just remained to figure out what sort of a woman I was going to be. Either I would learn to cope with my concerns or I would not. If I did, I would probably lead a normal—perhaps even happy—life in Ovid. If not... well, it was best not to think about that now.

Whatever Vera March had done to me had indeed allowed me to set some of those concerns aside. For the first time since my transformation, I began to think about what sex might be like as a woman without breaking out in a terrified sweat. As a man, I had made love many times with a number of women. Most seemed to genuinely enjoy the experience. If they could, why couldn’t I?

I looked at the clock on the mantel. Mike would be back at any time. Then, it would be off to the game, followed by... well, I didn’t know

what it would be followed by to be honest. I had to pick something to wear.

Only later would I realize that whatever the goddess had done to me was really starting to kick in. Rather than looking for something utilitarian and warm, I began mentally selecting and eliminating items from my closet with an unusually practiced eye. A pair of jeans here, a sweater there, practical shoes—no not-so-practical shoes with a little more heel. I fell into the automatic mode I had experienced earlier, until at last I had the right combination.

Looking into the mirror, I couldn't imagine for the life of me why I had thought myself unattractive when I had first looked at my driver's license picture. All it took was the right makeup, the right style for my hair, and the right clothes. In the wrong jeans with the wrong hairstyle and makeup, I might have looked positively boyish, if you discounted my obvious breasts. That wasn't the case though, now. The red turtleneck sweater I wore stuck out prominently in a very un-boyish way. My dark blue jeans were practically painted on, displaying feminine hips, a spectacular tush, and long, supple legs, accented by the black heeled boots. I had gone light on jewelry, opting instead for more eye-catching makeup. I might have been thirty-three, but I could have passed for twenty-five in a pinch.

My preening in front of the mirror ended suddenly as the doorbell rang. It had to be Mike, I realized. As usual, mixed emotions tore through my mind. I had really come to like Mike, but in the way I would have liked him before my change—as a friend. I felt joy at the arrival of my friend. And as before, there was trepidation as well, for I knew very well that what Mike wanted was more than just friendship—something I wasn't sure I could give him or any other man for that matter.

But there was something new in the emotional mix that hadn't been there before. Had the goddess put it there, or had it been there all along? It was difficult to say. Whatever the reason, I had begun to wonder—wonder what it might be like to be the woman Mike thought I was. Could I be such a woman?

As I rushed to the door, I wasn't sure if I could be that woman or not.

But my body had started sending me little messages that weren't hard to interpret. As a man, I remembered similar feelings—the rush caused by anticipation as a pretty girl approached or the longing sensation of anticipation translated through my penis. I lacked one of those now, of course, so the sensation took on a different and yet similar aspect as I felt just the tiniest tingle in my breasts and in the emptiness between my legs.

There was a split second in which I nearly didn't answer the door, wanting instead to turn and call Vera March and beg her to undo whatever it was that she had done. But the moment passed, suspended in the alternatives of time never to be realized.

"Hi there," Mike said cheerfully as I opened the door.

"Hi yourself," I responded, taking in his very male body as if for the first time. He wore jeans and a navy blue sweater—an outfit similar in some respects to my own. But unlike my feminine attire, his clothing exuded masculinity. I looked into his eyes as if for the first time, my body unconsciously leaning forward, my face tilted upward. On my toes, my face came even with his and I kissed him convincingly on the lips. "I missed you."

He seemed a bit flustered at my actions. Since I had become Gabby, I had never initiated a kiss like that. "Well," he said, his face turning just a little red, "I think I'll have to be gone more often if that's the kind of kiss I get when I return."

I just laughed. It was a natural laugh and I liked the sound of it. "Do we need to go now?"

He looked at his watch. "Kickoff is in about an hour. I thought we'd walk on over to the stadium and get a bite to eat there."

I smiled. "Sounds fun. Let's."

I had walked arm in arm with Mike before, but never had I sidled so close to him. The weather was sunny but brisk, and the warmth of his body felt good. As far back as I could remember, I had prided myself in my ability to take care of myself, but sheltered in Mike's arm, I felt

strangely safer than at any other time since my transformation. In a way, I envied Mike, because he was all of the things I had been as a man—handsome, fit, and presumably virile—but on the other hand, I was oddly content just to be with him because he was all of those things.

In retrospect, walking with Mike to the stadium was an epiphany. I was truly content, forgetting for the moment the concerns about the mission, the presumed betrayal by the Ice Queen, my life as a SEAL and as a man, and the ominous warnings of the gods which spelled a potential end for our world. None of these things were as important as the feeling of Mike's body next to mine.

We barely got in our seats in time for the kickoff. Two rows ahead of us, Susan stood and waved. She motioned for us to come down and sit in two empty seats next to them. It was obvious that Mike knew Susan's husband, so we moved on down.

"Normally, Cindy Patton sits here with her husband," Susan whispered to me once Mike and her husband became preoccupied discussing the game. "She and her husband are in New Orleans for a few days while he is in some business meetings, so I know nobody will be sitting here."

Once we had gotten past the small talk, we settled down for the game. As a man, I had been interested in football and had played in high school as well as at Annapolis. Unfortunately, being around the world had made it difficult for me to follow any teams closely, even with the ability to pick up satellite broadcasts. Even so, I was sure I had never heard of East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma.

Of course, as I understood things, no one from East Central University had ever heard of Capta College either. Their team would march into Ovid, play their game, and leave again, never aware that they had done anything that day except use a bye date for a little rest and recovery. A special edition of the Tulsa and Oklahoma City papers would report on the game, but neither of those articles would ever be seen outside Ovid.

The game was exciting, but Capta was outmatched by the Tigers of East Central. In the end, East Central won by a touchdown. At least I knew the gods hadn't stooped to fixing football games.

During the game, I had been sitting very close to Mike—so close that Susan gave me a sly glance. During the halftime as Mike and Steven—Susan's husband—went for drinks, Susan leaned over to me. "You and Mike seem to be getting along fine."

"Maybe too fine," I replied with concern. "Just what did Vera do to me?"

Susan shrugged. "I told her to relieve your anxieties. She promised that was all she would do."

"Then explain to me why I'm getting so... so..."

"Hot?"

I felt my face turn red and looked around to make sure no one else was listening to our conversation. "What do you mean 'hot'?" I hissed.

"Gabby, guys aren't the only ones who get hot and bothered about sex. You've been a woman for a few days now, and your body is trying to tell you something, but until those anxieties were removed, you've been ignoring the signals from your body. Don't deny it, now. It happens to all of us after we get here."

"You mean I'm getting horny over a guy?"

"You've got the right equipment for it now," she replied as she wiggled her eyebrows.

"Shit!"

Susan spotted Mike and Steven wading back through the crowd with drinks. She patted my hand and said quickly, "Just let it happen, Gabby. What's the worst that can happen? Why, you can't even get pregnant here for a couple of months, so you might as well try it and see if you like it."

That was easy for her to say, I mused as we said our goodbyes after the game. She had already tried it and found that she liked it. Me? I

was scared half to death, in spite of the fact that my body was sending me increasingly strong signals—signals that I could easily identify as sexual urges.

Steven had invited us to join them at Tony's, an Italian place downtown. Before I could say anything, Mike told him, "We'd love to, but we have a reservation at Winston's in a couple of hours."

I felt a strange mixture of relief and disappointment. On the one hand, I liked Susan very much, and her husband seemed nice as well. It would have been fun to go out with them. And, of course, it would delay any designs on me Mike might have. As for the relief... well, I'm not sure where that came from. Maybe I was just thinking that Winston's sounded like a good place. It had been mentioned in our briefings, and male or female, I was always in the mood for a good steak. Besides, if we were going to Winston's that meant Mike wouldn't try any funny business with me—at least until after he had wine and dined me.

Mike dropped me off at my place to get ready for dinner while he went home to change as well. I thought it a little funny, since I doubted if a small town steak house had anything resembling a dress code, but it seemed important to Mike, so I decided to be a little bit formal.

Selecting women's clothing was still something of a mystery to me, so I allowed myself to go into automatic mode, pretty much going along for the ride in a near alpha state as I selected a black bra and panties, matching slip, and a somewhat sheer shortish black dress. A few silver trinkets were added to the outfit, making me wonder how I could look so damned sexy in what Mike would probably identify as Oakland Raider colors.

I touched up my makeup, teased my hair, and slipped on a pair of black heels just as the doorbell rang.

"That's what I like about you," Mike commented as I opened the door. "You're always ready on time. Are you sure you're not a guy?"

I blushed at his little joke, wondering what Mike would say if he were to realize the question wasn't as funny as he thought. "Do I look like a

guy?”

He smiled. “Not in the least. You look stunning.”

I smiled back. He didn’t look so bad himself. Mike had the sort of physique that looked great in a suit, and the navy blue pinstripe number with the blue oxford shirt and red tie made him look like a candidate for Governor of California. In spite of myself, I couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like...

“Are you ready to go?” he asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” I said starting out the door.

“Hey! You’d better wear a coat. It’s a little cool out there, and you just might freeze in that dress.”

He was right, of course. I fumbled around in the closet until I found a dark cloth coat that would go with the dress. Why was I being such a dunce? I was acting like... like...

I was acting like a girl going out on her first big formal date.

Shit! How had I sunk so low so fast?

Fortunately, Mike talked as we drove to Winston’s. I wasn’t sure I could carry on a lucid conversation. My mind was too busy fighting my body. Or maybe it was just part of my mind fighting the other part. Whatever it was, I kept swinging from near panic at the thought that Mike would probably try to feed me and get me drunk enough to go back to his place or mine and do... well, do just about anything he wanted. The other part of me was wondering what it might be like to do everything he wanted—and enjoying the idea at that!

Winston’s was surprisingly nice for a small town steak house. It boasted linen tablecloths, classical music, a host in a good-quality dark suit and a wait staff nicely attired in white shirts or blouses and black trousers or skirts, appropriate to their gender. The waiters even wore dark ties.

I was a little taken aback when the host held my chair for me. I wanted to tell him I wasn’t some helpless little babe who couldn’t move her

own chair, but I suppose that was the SEAL in me barking to get out. Some small part of me was actually flattered by the attention. I even managed to give the waiter a smile of thanks.

“Did you want to get an appetizer?” Mike asked when we were seated.

As a man, I would have probably had one, but I had noticed that as a woman, I didn’t seem to need as much food, so I shook my head. “If I did, I wouldn’t be able to eat a steak.”

Mike smiled. “So you’re a cheap date, huh?”

Cheap, but not easy, I thought. Maybe I should have ordered an appetizer. It would prolong the meal and I could always beg off from any later activities because I was too tired and too full. But in fact, I did want to save myself for the steak. As a SEAL, I was used to eating big meals and working them off. I loved steak, and the aromas wafting through the dining room were enough to convince me that Winston’s could have held its own with some of the best steak houses I had ever visited.

We ordered, Mike choosing a large Kansas City strip while I reluctantly ordered a petit filet. It seemed to be one of the smaller selections on the menu.

Of course, along with some very fine steaks along with all the trimmings, we had to have a good wine. As a man, I had enjoyed wine, but I always felt a little uncomfortable ordering it. Fortunately, Mike seemed to know wines well and ordered a superb one. I mention this because I think the wine was the beginning of my downfall.

Like a lot of SEALs, I subscribed to the philosophy of ‘work hard—play hard,’ so I thought I could hold my liquor as well as the next guy. The problem was I wasn’t a guy any more. I was a much smaller woman whose body weight wasn’t sufficient to absorb as much alcohol. Oh, I thought I was fine as we sat there together enjoying a wonderful meal, but the dulling effect of the wine was breaking down whatever mental resistance to giving in to my new body that I might have retained.

Coupled, I told myself, with whatever Vera March had done to me, I

found myself becoming less inhibited—mentally at least.

Specifically, I was growing more and more curious about what it would be like to make love to Mike. My curiosity was growing with every sip of wine, and my body was beginning to respond to that curiosity as well. I don't even think I recognized just what was happening at first. A man feels sexual stimulation in essentially one place. A woman feels it concentrated in a few key spots, of course, but a woman feels sexual attraction almost all through her body. It's not as intensely demanding as a man's sexual stirrings, but it's every bit as real.

In short, I was getting incredibly horny before I realized what had hit me.

We lingered over coffee—but no dessert. Both of us considered our workouts to be strenuous enough without adding unnecessary calories to the situation. We talked about inconsequential things—the game, what we had done since we had last been together (except for my session with The Judge, of course), and the like. At last, Mike asked, “Are you ready to go?”

Even in my slightly inebriated state, alarm bells went off. This was it! This was the moment. He had treated me to a special evening—a special day, actually—and now it was time to pay the piper. I realized if I had been in his shoes, I would have thought exactly that, too. In fact, I was thinking it even as who I had become. It had to be Vera's magic. She had changed me from a reluctant transformee into a horny woman who was actually looking forward to hopping in the sack with a man. What had I done to myself? Less than a week ago, I had been a man—a very straight man—and yet here I was seriously contemplating having sex with Mike. The war inside my mind and body was becoming more fierce, and I honestly wasn't certain which side would win.

All the way home, we were both silent, as if we had something on each of our minds. I was sure that what was on Mike's mind was how best to maneuver me into the bedroom. I looked pretty damned hot that evening, if I do say so myself, so I couldn't really blame him for thinking that way, could I?

As for me, I felt like I suspected most girls felt when they were seriously thinking about giving their virginity to a boy. Of course, as far as anyone knew, Gabby was hardly a virgin. I had been married, I had a daughter, and I was thirty-something. Any one of those facts would have moved me out of the virgin column. The problem was that I had only been Gabby for a few days, so I might as well have been a virgin. Mentally trapped inside this body I was certainly one.

What would it be like to have Mike inside of me? Would it hurt? Most of the women I had known intimately seemed to enjoy the experience of lovemaking as much as I had. None of them seemed to be in pain. Well, there was Mary Sue back in high school, but she had really been a virgin...

Suddenly, I realized I had no protection. If Mike did enter me, he was going to leave something behind. No, that wasn't right. I remember the briefings where it said that transformed women couldn't get pregnant for the first few weeks—it was something to do with allowing new women to get acclimated to their new sex before having to worry about pregnancy. Susan had mentioned that as well. Still, the thought of having a man ejaculate into my body was enough to make me cringe.

But women seemed to enjoy it...

And Mike wasn't a bad looking guy. There: I said it to myself. I liked the way he looked. What would he look like without any clothes on? He'd look strong, I decided, and fit. He'd look... manly.

What the hell was going on between my legs? I felt warm, and the warmth seemed to be coming from inside me. I felt something else, too: dampness. It was as if I was holding warm water in my panties. I hadn't peed myself, had I? No... no, it wasn't anything like that. It was like... It was like...

"Well, we're home," Mike said suddenly, shocking me out of my reverie. Yes, we were home—Gabby's home. My home.

"Are you all right?" he asked, worried.

“Oh! Yes... yes, I’m fine.”

He looked at me carefully in the dim light cast from my porch light.

“Can I come in? I have something I want to tell you.”

Yeah, he wanted to tell me that it was time to pay for my meal.

Somehow, that made me feel even warmer and moister. This was it!

This was the moment. I was scared, anxious, ready and reluctant all at the same time. But I was something else, too, I suddenly realized.

I was horny.

Mike ushered me into the house, but instead of leading me directly to the bedroom as I had suspected he would do, he guided me to the couch in the living room. What was he thinking? Did he think I needed another drink to loosen me up? Why was he being so gentle? Why didn’t he put those strong arms around me and begin tearing my clothes off? Why wasn’t he doing something about the ache between my legs?

“I guess I’m being a little old-fashioned,” he said at last. With that, I thought he was getting lower to sit next to me on the couch, but he got down on the floor instead, reaching into his pocket. He was on one knee and holding something in his hand—a velvet box—and... and...

Oh my God, no!

“Gabby, will you marry me?”

There it was—out in the open. He had said it. He wasn’t going to haul me into bed: he was proposing. That was what he meant by a big night. Had Gabby known? Should I have known?

I know to Mike, the next few moments must have seemed like an eternity. Frankly, they were for me as well, but for a different reason. I suddenly realized in that pregnant moment that I had misjudged Mike—I thought he was like me, or rather like the man I had been. Sure, I had taken a liking to the guy, but deep down, I thought he was just after a piece of ass. Ever since my short-lived marriage had disintegrated, that was how I had played the game.

Not so Mike, though. The guy was sincere. He loved me! Jeez, what

was I going to do? I had petitioned the goddess Venus to brace me for a night of sex as a woman, but I had no defense against a proposal of marriage.

The strange thing was that I was honestly considering it. Why? Well, it was starting to appear quite unlikely that I would ever be changed back into a man again, and as an attractive youngish woman, I was bound to be hit on regularly. Eventually, I would probably give in naturally to the enhanced sex drive Vera March had given me. In fact, even without any help from Vera March, I would probably give in to sex in my new body: I got the idea that everyone eventually did. So why not latch onto Mike? I liked him and Sophie liked him. Besides, I had this growing itch that needed to be scratched. The sooner I said yes, the sooner I could get my needs taken care of.

Damn! Why had I let Vera March tinker with my sex drive? If I hadn't made the mistake of asking her to help me, I could probably have gently declined Mike's offer and sent him on his way. But now—right now—I wanted him. Damn it, I needed him! If I had to agree to marry him to get what I needed, then so be it.

"Yes, Mike," I replied at last, allowing the poor man to breathe again.

"Yes?" he asked incredulously. "You'll marry me?"

I forced a smile. "Yes, I'll marry you." Now come on, you big lug, I thought to myself. Sweep me up in your arms and carry me into the bedroom and get down to business. I can't take it much longer!

He did take me in his arms and lower his face to mine, but the kiss was sweet—almost chaste—rather than the passionate assault I had been anticipating. I threw my arms around him and thrust my tongue between his unsuspecting lips. My eyes were open, and suddenly so were his—wide in surprise. I thought the kiss would help, but it just turned up the fire. The heat between my legs could have melted lead and still he wasn't moving me toward the bedroom.

"Gabby..." he began, coming up for air.

"Come on!" I urged, leading him in the direction of the bedroom. If he

wasn't going to take the lead, I'd have to.

At last the light dawned in his eyes. "Gabby, I thought you said you wouldn't go to bed with any man until you married again."

I did? She did? Oh, hell! I had misread the whole situation. Now I was so damned horny that if Mike didn't take me to bed, I'd be up all night playing with myself until I was raw. Well, the sweet smile had worked before. I turned it on again. "Can't a girl change her mind? Besides, if we're engaged..."

Any time a woman lets her voice trail off like that, any upstanding heterosexual man will fill in the rest of the sentence in a way most favorable to initiating sex. Mike was no exception to the rule. "Well, if you insist..." he drawled.

Come to think of it, women could fill in the rest of a sentence, too.

It was like nothing I had ever imagined. How could something the remnants of my male mind told me was so wrong feel so right?

I let Mike undress me, savoring the gentle feel of his hands on my electrified body. I reciprocated, tugging off his shirt, almost pulling off the buttons, and helping him remove his trousers. Standing nude before him, I pulled down his boxers, nearly cringing as I saw how big he had become. I was hardly an expert on the size of male organs. Like most men, I made it a point not to notice another man's equipment in, say, a communal shower. I had seldom even glanced at my own member when I had it. Had mine been that large? How could something that huge ever fit in me?

But it was too late to turn back now. My body was pulsating with urgent messages all telling me that what Mike had was exactly what I needed. Gently, he lowered me onto the bed, and I offered no resistance. I became almost embarrassed at how skillful he was. I knew that as a man, I had never been so patient, so gentle. His big rough hands glided effortlessly over my smooth skin, sending still more shock waves throughout my body. He began with my breasts, moving his nimble fingers to brush across my inflated nipples. The anticipation was greater than I had ever dreamed possible.

His hand moved lower then, brushing against my pubic hair until he found what he was looking for. I had avoided touching it myself, except out of necessity. I had no idea how sensitive it could be. I spread my legs wider to allow him to probe deeper.

By the time he was ready to enter me, I was completely on fire. No thoughts of my former life or my mission or my transformation managed to surface. All of my thoughts were centered on the sensations my body was experiencing. To my surprise, his entry was not painful at all. Instead, it felt absolutely wonderful.

Before Mike came, I experienced the first of what proved to be several delightful orgasms. My body shuddered involuntarily. The sensation wasn't exactly as intense as my male orgasms had been, but they lasted so very much longer and there were so many of them. I came again as I felt Mike building to his own climax. It wasn't as intense as the first orgasm, but coupled with the ebbing sensations I was already experiencing, it actually took me higher than I had been before.

Mike had been careful, using a condom which he had unconsciously scooped up from my nightstand. I had no doubt that it had been placed there by Vera March when I noticed the logo of March's on the discarded package later. I had almost regretted him using it. I wanted to feel the sensation of his cum filling me, but it was not to be. Ah well, safe sex made sense. When we were married, I thought dreamily as I drifted off to sleep, I'd go on the pill. Then he could fill me as much as I liked...

Yes, my first thought when I awakened naked in his arms the next morning was, 'Oh God! What have I done?' The male that I had been for most of my life still occupied a distinct corner of my mind, and upon awakening, it took momentary control, but the control faded with the physical awareness of my body.

So my second thought was how good his arms felt curled around me. How quickly my mind had shifted! Days—possibly even hours—ago, I would have thought I could never be content to be held as a woman. Now, it seemed oddly natural. I attributed it to Vera March's spell, but to be completely honest with myself, I realized even her spell hadn't

been the only element in my decision to make love with Mike.

I was a woman—now and forever. I had spent fruitless hours bemoaning my fate, hoping against hope that some miracle as great as the one that had changed me into a woman would suddenly change me back into the man I had been. Now, I had come to realize that The Judge had changed me—as he had changed many before me—into the person I would be for the rest of my life. And as a woman, I craved something I had first denied: I craved a good man to share my life with.

I began to realize as I lay there that that was what had been missing from my life as a man. My brief marriage had failed because I felt my career as a SEAL was an adequate substitute for a partner with whom I could share my life. But I was wrong. It took a radical transformation and the realization that I could never again be a SEAL to make me realize what had been missing.

Wistfully, I wondered what it might have been like if I had still been a man, met a Michelle instead of a Mike outside Ovid, and been smart enough to see that finding a love to share my life was better than proving my manhood over and over in the very hell holes of the world. The problem was that Lieutenant Douglas Harmon would probably have been too wrapped up in his male hormones to do that. But Gabriella Leone didn't have to worry about male hormones I realized, smiling softly to myself.

"Are you awake?" Mike asked gently.

"Uh-huh."

"Do you want to get up?" he asked, starting to withdraw his arm.

"Not just yet," I replied, pulling his arm tighter around me. My body tingled thinking about what I was going to say next. "I'm not quite done with you."

I found making love first thing in the morning was every bit as exciting as doing it last thing at night.

I picked up Sophie Sunday afternoon in the parking lot at the First Baptist Church. Her jeans and sweatshirt looked as if she had slept in them (which she probably had, I realized) and instead of makeup, her face bore a couple of smudges. Her long hair had been pulled back into a loose ponytail and she wore no earrings. She also looked happy as a pig in shit.

"It was fantastic!" she giggled (yes, giggled) once we had loaded her gear into the car. "It was like all the fun stuff we used to do on missions without all the crappy parts."

By crappy parts, I assumed she meant blowing the living shit out of terrorists who had holed up in Afghani caves.

"The food was pretty decent, too. And the other girls were a lot of fun," she effused. Then her face got a little more serious. "The only problem is that I miss being able to walk out into the bush and take a leak."

"How did you manage that?" I asked. I knew what she meant. All that sitting to pee and wiping afterward was a real pain.

"Hey, mom, it was a Girl Scout camp," she replied. "They had outhouses—clean outhouses, no less—and plenty of toilet paper." She shuddered just a little. "They even had tampon dispensers."

"Oh goody," I said sarcastically as we drove home. "It sounds as if you've acclimated to your new identity pretty well."

"Yeah, I guess so..." she began. Then she stopped and looked at my left hand perched on the steering wheel. The engagement ring wasn't ostentatious, but it was obvious. "Oh my God, it looks like you've acclimated pretty well, too."

My face flushed. "I guess I have."

As we hefted her pack into the house, I told her everything that had transpired since she had left for camp. Of course, it was somewhat edited. I told her I had seen Vera March to get her to help me endure Mike's proposed big night, but I didn't tell her how I had ended up in bed. Instead, I gave her the sanitized 'motherly' version, concentrating on how I had come to realize my life in Ovid was permanent and how

Mike seemed like a logical choice to share that life with.

Sophie couldn't be fooled, though. As we sat at the kitchen table drinking Diet Cokes, she grinned. "You're holding out on me."

"No I'm not!" I protested.

"Sure you are. You guys ended up in bed together, didn't you?"

"I... well..." It made no sense to lie to her. She knew I had ended up having sex just from the way I was hemming and hawing. I couldn't say it, though. After all, this was Doc—a fellow SEAL. I just knew she was going to be disgusted with me.

To my surprise, she wasn't. "Hey, that's great!" she exclaimed.

"Great?"

She nodded, grinning. "Look, I figured out over the weekend we'd never be going back to our old lives. Some of the other girls—they're like us—you know, changed. We had a chance to talk—one on one, of course. All of them said just about the same thing. They fought the changes at first, but it didn't take them long to get comfortable with their new lives. Some of them even have boyfriends, and some of them have even, you know, played around a little."

"I thought these girls were Girl Scouts—not Girl Sluts," I commented.

"Oh mom," she sighed melodramatically giving her best imitation of a beleaguered teenager, "that is so twentieth century."

"Sophie!"

She laughed, "Actually, compared to where I went to high school, the girls here in Ovid are candidates for nuns. Sexual morality is pretty highly regarded here. Come to think of it, other morality is, too. Nobody sneaked a pack of cigarettes or a bottle of vodka into camp like we did back in my Boy Scout days. But all joking aside, we all talked about sex. Most of us were pretty curious about it."

I remained silent, refusing to respond to what was an obvious prompt.

"Well," she said at last, unable to wait any longer, "so what is it like to

have sex as a woman?”

“It’s... nice,” I replied evasively. “Of course, Vera March’s spell had a lot to do with it.”

“Yeah, right,” she sneered.

“Well it did!”

“Don’t give me that!” she laughed. “I’ve seen how you look at him. As nearly as I’ve been told, I think the g... the powers that be in Ovid don’t make us do anything. They give us the shape, the right hormones, the right life, and we do the rest.”

“Are you telling me I wanted to go to bed with Mike?”

She shook her head. “Not exactly. If you were still a guy, you’d probably just be looking at Mike as a friend. With all your new equipment though, you want to do more than just have a couple of beers with him. It’s only natural.”

“When did you get your degree in psychology?” I asked her.

“I don’t need one,” she told me. “To be honest, by Friday I was checking out a few guys at school myself.”

“Uh... you aren’t thinking about...”

She laughed, shaking her head. “No, I’m not ready to go that far yet. As I said, among the girls in high school here, virginity is something to be valued.” She suddenly got serious. “But Friday one of the guys in class did ask me to go to a football game and the party afterwards next Friday night. I told him I’d have to ask you...”

She looked at me hopefully, and I realized she had the same concern I had been burdened with before I told her about having sex with Mike. She was worried about what I would think of her if she started actually dating boys. It was time to play concerned but understanding mom—a role I was sure to be playing from now on. “Is he a nice boy?”

“Oh yes,” she replied enthusiastically. “I think he was transformed, but he doesn’t remember. He’s really a great guy.”

I thought of asking his name, but I wouldn't have recognized it if she told me. Instead, I nodded my head. "I'd like to meet him."

She grinned. "I invited him over to study with me tomorrow night after school," she admitted.

"Just be sure you study something besides each other."

"Mother!"

Mike came by the house for the official announcement of our impending marriage. Sophie pretended she was hearing it for the first time and gushed like the teenage girl she had become, hugging him and planting a kiss on his cheek while calling him "Daddy." Mike ate it up—having two nice-looking Italian girls fawn over him had to be a lifelong ambition for him. He took us out to eat, taking us to a new little Mexican place called Miguel's located out on the highway. As we toasted each other with margaritas (well, Mike and I toasted with them anyway while Sophie looked on wistfully at her Diet Coke, acutely aware of her minor status) and chowed down on excellent enchiladas and tacos to the sound of Mexican music, I was almost able to forget that something bad was lurking around us, courtesy of the Ice Queen.

I was still in a festive mood when Mike dropped us off—or at least I was until a few minutes later when the phone rang.

"Gabby?" Susan's voice sounded tense.

"What's wrong, Susan?"

"What does this Steele look like?"

I thought for a moment. I had only seen him as a child once in front of Del's and I hadn't been able to stare at him without arousing suspicion. "He's just a kid now," I told her. "I'd say he's about eight or so—short dark hair, fair skin. Why?"

"I think he was just outside my window," she said speaking just above a whisper.

"Does he know you've seen him?" I asked.

"I don't think so. I'm going to call The Judge."

“We’re on our way over,” I told her, fumbling for my keys.

Sophie and I arrived in time to see Officer Mercer detaching something from the side of Susan’s house while she and her husband looked on in the dim porch light. Officer Mercer brought the object over to me. “Do you recognize it?” he asked.

It was a standard device every SEAL knew how to construct—a C4 charge with a small but accurate timer that is attached to the target with a strong tape that is nearly impossible to remove once it has bonded. I noted Officer Mercer had little problem removing it, though.

“We... we’re the target?” Susan asked, her voice shaking.

“One of them,” Officer Mercer replied cryptically. Then to me, he asked, “Can you disarm it?”

“Sure,” I replied. The bomb really wasn’t designed to be stealthy—just horribly deadly. The leads could be easily removed and I did so. It was then that I noticed the timer. “Shit! This thing was due to go off in less than a minute from now.”

Officer Mercer didn’t reply. One moment, he was there and the next moment he was gone. He had told Susan she was one of the known targets. To maximize the surprise, all the other explosive devices would undoubtedly be timed to go off at the same time. Obviously, he knew where any other bombs were and was on his way to stop them.

Sophie realized it, too. “He can’t find another bomb in time.” I nodded in agreement.

Susan actually smiled. “Time isn’t a problem for him,” she reminded us.

Even so, it must have been close. A few blocks away, a white streak shot through the sky, like a meteor in reverse. He must have found the bomb just as it was due to explode and moved it so fast that the force of the explosion was dissipated over a distance of miles in a fraction of a second.

“What was the target?” I asked.

No one answered, but I could see a troubled look on Susan's face. She knew the town well of course, and undoubtedly knew from the trajectory roughly where the other bomb had been placed.

Within moments, a crowd had gathered in Susan's front yard. Some of the people were obviously neighbors, alternately hugging Susan and her husband and speculating about the target of the other bomb. As I watched Susan, it became clear to me that although she wasn't saying anything, she had a pretty good idea of what the target was—and why her house had been a target as well.

The rest of the crowd hung back, silent and thoughtful but avoiding the anxious neighbors. Since The Judge and Vera March were among their number, I was sure that the dozen or so spectators in their knot were all gods. The Judge motioned for me to talk to him.

"We have been unable to detect either of the two suspects," he told me, speaking softly enough so as to be heard only by his associates. "They have found some way of blocking our detection."

"I don't know what they could be using," I told him honestly.

"But you can identify them. Do you have any idea where they might have gone?" he pressed. "Is there a pickup point where you were all to meet? Or is there somewhere in town that they would normally go to escape detection?"

I shook my head. "They could be anywhere. There was no rendezvous established. As for hiding in town, there was no safe house established. There may be one we weren't told of—someplace where a local friendly could hide them—but I have no idea where it might be."

The Judge nodded, accepting my explanation. As his attention turned to a large bearded man standing next to Vera March, on impulse I caught Vera's attention.

I wasn't unhappy with how things had worked out with Mike. In fact, I couldn't be happier, but I was curious about something: "What did you do to me?" I asked.

She smiled indulgently. "No more than what you asked me to do."

What had I asked her to do exactly? I had told her I was uncomfortable with the idea of making love to a man, and she had done... what? She had talked to me, but there had been no magic chanting as with The Judge. "Please refresh my memory. Exactly what did you do?"

"I simply removed your inhibitions by allowing you to see yourself as the woman you have become," she replied. "I didn't force you to have sex if that's what you're concerned about, nor did I alter your moral code in any fashion. I just allowed you to be in spirit the woman you were in body and let your natural instincts prevail."

I nodded but said nothing. She was right, I realized. As a man, I considered it the most natural thing in the world for a man and a woman to have sex when they felt strongly about each other. I considered Mike a close friend as we began our evening, and I considered him even more than a close friend when I accepted his ring. The rest just came naturally. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. I was a woman now and forever. Why would a woman deny herself the pleasures of her sex? Why should I?

I managed a smile of my own, holding up my left hand so she could see my ring.

"Then I guess I should thank you."

"Your smile is thanks enough," she told me, and with that, the Goddess of Love turned gracefully to consult with her fellow deities.

"I am beat!" Sophie exclaimed when we got home. She flipped on the lights and plopped down on the couch with a sigh.

"A little camping trip got you down?" I teased. "And you call yourself a SEAL." I didn't let on that I was tired, too. It had been an eventful weekend and tomorrow I had to get back into my schoolteacher persona.

"When I was a SEAL, we didn't sit around a campfire all evening eating s'mores and singing songs," she reminded me. "And we didn't spend half the night awake giggling in our sleeping bags and talking

about boys.”

I tried to imagine a bunch of SEALs doing exactly that. The image was as funny as it was preposterous.

“And I’ve got a math quiz tomorrow,” she groaned. “I had forgotten what a pain high school classes could be.”

I was about to make another snide comment when there was an unexpected knock on the door. “Who can that be?” I muttered, wondering for a moment if Mike had decided to come back over. I actually hoped he hadn’t. As much as I had come to enjoy his company, I really wanted to get a nice relaxing shower and go to bed.

I opened the door without thinking—something I would imagine no naturally-born woman in her right mind would do in broad daylight, let alone at night. I realized my mistake at once as I found myself staring into the eyes of Freda Jorgenson.

“Aren’t you going to invite us in?” she asked with mock sweetness. I stepped aside to let her and the young boy that was Steele enter. I had no choice since she had a Mac 10 trained on me all the time.

“What?” Sophie jumped up from the couch.

The Ice Queen wasn’t distracted, her weapon still pointed at me. “Oh, don’t bother getting up for us, dear. If you don’t want mommy here to die, you’ll sit back down.” She motioned for me to sit next to Sophie on the couch.

“What do you want?” I asked, trying to hide my fear. Being afraid had nothing to do with my new sex. Had I still been a man, I would have been equally disturbed at seeing a weapon as deadly as a Mac 10 pointed at my chest.

“We just need a place to lie low for a while,” she replied smoothly. She ruffled Steele’s hair, ignoring his deep embarrassment. “Chicky and I just need a place to hide until our extraction team can get us out. We’ll be gone in a couple of hours.”

“I thought no one got out of Ovid without The Judge’s permission,” I pointed out.

Jorgenson shrugged. "Usually, that is the case—for humans. As I'm sure you know by now, I don't have that particular shortcoming. I've decided to make an exception for Chicky here as well. He's really very good at explosives, you know. I can use his talents. Who would ever suspect a young boy of having such deadly skills?"

Steele said nothing, but the look in his eyes at the thought of having more explosions to create was nothing short of bliss. Steele had gone around the bend. Maybe it was his transformation into a young boy, or maybe Jorgenson had just enhanced a madness he had been able to contain as a SEAL. Whatever the reason, the madness in his eyes would be reflected in the death of many people if he wasn't stopped.

"Why target Susan? And who was the other target?" I pressed.

She shook her head. "Really, Lieutenant, you're in no position to be asking questions. I really do intend to leave the two of you alive, so I don't want to tell you anything you will just repeat to The Judge. I think it's appropriate that you be forced to face your failures as warriors and spend the rest of your lives with pussies. I really couldn't believe it when Steele here told me he overheard you talking to that pompous Jupiter like an old friend. That's how we discovered who you were, you know. Steele was hiding in the bushes close enough to overhear you."

"You betrayed us!" I snapped. "You set us up. We were just a diversion for your mission."

"Well, you may be a weak little cunt but you can still think like a warrior," she laughed. "You're correct, of course. I knew Jupiter and his minions would be braced for a foray after the information on Ovid got in government hands. But the old fool is so predictable. He used Admiral Nepper—his brother, by the way—to round up a team of doomed special forces personnel. But he didn't know how well-connected we were. We used you and your men as bait, figuring once they had you, they'd figure the threat was over."

"But you didn't realize that The Judge knew exactly who was on the team, did you?" I ventured. "When Steele wasn't with us, they

redoubled their efforts.”

“Steele is very handy—for a human,” she acknowledged. “I was just going to kill our targets the old-fashioned way, but Steele intrigued me.”

Steele looked up at her and smiled, his boyish eyes twinkling with twisted adoration.

“He’s a natural killer,” she explained, almost like a proud mother. “He really enjoys his work, don’t you, Steele?”

“Oh yes...” he replied with a sigh.

“He’s the only true SEAL among you,” she snapped. “The rest of you were lambs. He was the only wolf.”

I said nothing in rebuttal. From her perspective, she was right. I had known many men and even a few women who had been forced to look into the eyes of an enemy they had to kill. While they were capable of doing it, none really enjoyed it. Freda Jorgenson’s eyes burned with rapture at the thought of death, and Steele might as well have been her offspring.

“But why did you wait so long to execute your mission?” I asked. “You could have taken Susan and her family out at any time. If you had, I never would have seen you. The Judge would have been unprepared.”

Her look of contempt turned sour. “Because our other target was out of town,” she admitted. “We had no way of knowing it, and once we were inserted, we had to stay until we could acquire our target.”

“Why couldn’t you just drop through the rift again?” Sophie asked. “You didn’t have to stay in Ovid and take a chance on being caught like we were.”

She laughed at that question. It wasn’t a pleasant laugh. “Don’t be a fool. There is no rift. Anyone can enter Ovid. If they belong—if they are about to die—they’ll be forced to stay. If not, they’ll pass right on through town and forget they have ever been here. You were all destined to die. That was why Neptune—you think of him as Admiral

Nepper—selected you. I could have left at any time and returned later, but my little pet here...” Again, she ruffled her new acolyte’s hair, “... was marked for Ovid. He couldn’t have left and we would have been discovered if we tried.”

She looked at her watch. “Speaking of that, we will need to leave the house early—in case the extraction team is early. Fortunately, they have a way for my young helper here to leave with us.”

I had no doubt she had planned her escape well. Obviously, she didn’t concern herself with forgetting about Ovid once she left. I wondered why. I had a pretty good idea, but I wanted to make sure first. “Who are you really?” I asked.

Her smile was feral. “I would have thought you might have figured it out by now.”

“I know you are some sort of... like The Judge. But who are you?”

“I am known by several names,” she replied proudly. “Most scholars call me Freya, and I am the Norse goddess of war and death.”

She looked at me smugly as if her name had weight. I was happy to disappoint her. Like all kids, I had read some mythology as a boy, but it was mostly the Greek and Roman stories. I didn’t know Norse gods from smorgasbord. Deep down, though, the war part didn’t bother me nearly as much as the death part. Her obvious contempt for Sophie and me meant we couldn’t trust her letting us go, even though she had promised to do so. Her last act in Ovid could well be to gun us down, enjoying the spectacle as we died in front of her eyes.

That was bad, because I had discovered over the weekend that I had something worth living for. Had Freda—or Freya—threatened me immediately after my transformation, I might have willingly taken a fatal bullet just to escape what I had become. In a few short days though, I had learned that my new life wasn’t so bad after all. In some ways, I would always miss being a SEAL. It had been an integral part of my life. But in other ways, I had come to appreciate the life I had been given even more. Teaching was actually sort of fun: Sophie had become as close to me as a... well, as close to me as a daughter. And

then there was Mike. How could I have ever imagined that sex with a man could be so wonderful?

“You’ll drive,” Freya ordered, motioning with her gun for emphasis. “I’ll be right behind you with this pointed at the back of your head.”

“Where are we going?” I asked, reluctant to move.

“I’ll tell you that when we’re in the car.”

I had to play for time—to try to keep her talking until there was an opening. “What was your mission? Why were you trying to kill those people?”

She favored me with an evil smile. “That won’t work. I know you’re just stalling. This isn’t some sort of James Bond movie where the villain spills her guts. All you need to know is that you’ve chosen the wrong side in this conflict. Now if you and your new sweet young daughter here want to live through the night, move! Now!”

There was no opening for me, but Sophie and I weren’t the only protagonists as it turned out. One second, we were standing there, facing the gun of an angry goddess. The next moment, the door was open—not just open, but embedded in the wall from swinging open so far. Before the sound of the door crashing into the wall could be heard, the gun was out of Freya’s hand and she was lying on the ground unconscious.

Steele reacted next. The SEAL now trapped in the body of a little boy tried to make a run for the open door. Before he could make it, Sophie had snatched him so quickly that his little legs were still churning as she held him off the ground. “Not so fast, Junior!” she laughed. “Stop struggling or Sophie spank!”

Apparently whatever the goddess had done to Steele made him react like the angry little boy he appeared to be. He flailed wildly, tears streaming from his eyes as he whimpered, “You let me go! I’ll tell!” The Judge touched the boy lightly and he collapsed unconscious, falling from Sophie’s arms onto the floor next to his mentor.

Officer Mercer stood before the prone body of the Norse goddess. Not

a hair was out of place, in spite of the fact that he had broken through the front door and cold cocked The Ice Queen before any of us had even known he was there. His only movement now was to slowly adjust his mirrored sunglasses.

“Sorry about the door,” The Judge called calmly from the open doorway. “I’ll make sure it’s fixed within the hour.”

“How did you know they were here?” I asked, trying not to tremble with the relief I now felt.

“You told us, my dear.”

“I told you?”

He nodded. “You said it was likely that they would try to hide with a local friendly. All of the others on your team are too young or would not remember our friend here. Only you were in a position to offer her sanctuary.”

“I hope you don’t think this was my idea...” I began.

He waved me off with his hand. “Of course not. The circumstances are obvious. There was simply no one else she could turn to. You’ve been very helpful, Gabby. I’m very pleased with how far you’ve come in such a short time.”

Strangely, that made me feel good.

Officer Mercer removed Freya and Steele from our house right away while they were still unconscious. I didn’t envy either of them.

Whatever The Judge had planned for them was probably not as benign as the way he had treated me and the rest of my team. The Judge, good to his word, repaired our door. I guess I should say he replaced the door. With a wave of his hand and a soft chant, the door was back in place and the wall it had smashed into repaired. I couldn’t help but notice he had actually upgraded the hardware on the door when he replaced it.

He turned to us. “I know you’re both curious about what has happened here tonight and why. I would ask both of you to keep quiet about what you know and seek no further answers. You are no longer

SEALs on a mission: you are citizens of Ovid, with all of the privileges and responsibilities that such status entails. Part of those responsibilities is to keep quiet about what you have seen and heard here tonight.”

Sophie and I both nodded. I couldn’t help but think of a phrase we had learned back in our Academy days: ‘Rank hath its privileges—rank hath its responsibilities.’ As SEALs, we had spent years fighting the enemies of our way of life. In a strange way, I had come to realize that as citizens of Ovid, we were somehow continuing to do that, although in a way we couldn’t completely understand.

“One more thing,” The Judge said, pulling an envelope from his suit pocket. “Consider this a little reward from us.”

I opened the envelope, and while Sophie and I stared at its contents, The Judge somehow vanished without even opening the door.

“What is it?” Sophie asked.

“Something that will probably come in handy for us now,” I grinned. I handed the single sheet of paper to her. She read it and returned my grin.

It was a thousand dollar gift certificate for March’s Department Store.

The Judge’s chambers appeared around me, and I looked up into four faces, each displaying a different expression. The Judge looked downright angry, although at whom I wasn’t certain. Maybe he was angry at himself for not foreseeing the potentially deadly assault on his community. Officer Mercer was impassive as always. I wondered—not for the first time—if it was a reflection of the way he really thought or merely a mask of a character he played in Ovid.

As for the Nordic blonde, she looked thoughtful—not in character with whom I now knew her to be. She was Freya—the Ice Queen. What was she doing in The Judge’s chambers? She was the enemy. Yet she too, acted as if she was seeing the events of the past few days for the first time.

It was Susan's expression that concerned me the most. She looked very disturbed, and I knew it was something more than the fact that she had nearly been one of the victims of a deadly attack. She was holding something back—something I think she had just discovered for the first time, although it was something I'm sure she suspected.

"The other bomb was at my house, wasn't it?" I asked her softly.

She nodded, biting her lip. I realized suddenly that the bright flash I had seen during the night had not been a thunderstorm after all. Instead, it had nearly been an unpleasant end for me and my family.

I turned to The Judge. "Why?"

He controlled his emotions as usual, but there was none of his usual bravado. His reply to me was nearly as soft as my question had been. "It's not something we can discuss now."

"But I want to discuss it now," I pressed. "My family—and Susan's family—were nearly killed last night. I want to know why."

The Judge's eyes were not without pity. I think he wanted to tell us the reason we had been nearly killed, but something held him back. He was silent for a moment, as if trying to decide some compromise which would satisfy both Susan and me. "I will make you a promise," he said at last. "I will tell both of you as soon as the current crisis is resolved."

"But there always seems to be a new crisis," Susan reminded him. "First, it was The Others, and now... who?"

"War gods," Officer Mercer explained.

The Judge nodded. "Yes. The Others were merely misguided members of our own pantheon. They had forsworn any meddling in human affairs. This new enemy seeks to actively create the very war we want to prevent."

"But they could be killed, too," I pointed out.

"Just as you humans have always had some voices who believe a nuclear war could be both decisive and winnable, they believe they

would prevail,” The Judge countered. “To make matters worse, we don’t even know which pantheons are involved.”

Unspoken, but certainly on my mind, was that Vera March’s husband was perhaps the best known war god of all. Could it be that we had a high ranking traitor in our midst?

“Why not ask her?” Susan nodded at Freya.

“Because I’m not who I appear to be,” she replied, cracking a small but recognizable smile.

“Diana!” I gasped. The smile became wider.

“Diana was the logical choice to return in Freya’s place,” The Judge explained. “With her help, we will be able to free my brother and perhaps learn more of our new enemy.”

“I’ll also be able to misinform our enemies and make them think Freya was successful in her mission,” Diana added.

I shuddered when I realized that Freya’s success would have meant the death of both my family and Susan’s.

“In the mean time, your families will be placed under closer protection,” The Judge assured us. “It is imperative that you and your families survive.”

I nodded. There seemed little more to say. Susan and I would undoubtedly speak of it later—perhaps over lunch.

For now, I would have to content myself with The Judge’s promise that we would be protected and that all would be explained to us once the current crisis had passed.

I only could hope that it was soon.

Ovid XIX: The Sleeper

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The call from The Judge on an otherwise quiet Sunday afternoon came as no great surprise, after what had happened on Saturday. I had even arranged for Myra Smithwick to come over and babysit for me, since Jerry was breaking in a new weekend manager at the store.

Normally, I would have asked Susan to watch them, since her Joshua and my Ashley really seemed to enjoy each other's company, but Susan and her husband were in Kansas City at a Chiefs game, having left Joshua with Martha Pearson so they could enjoy a romantic weekend. I wouldn't be surprised if this weekend marked the start of a sibling for Joshua. In any case, I didn't want to saddle Martha with another charge since I wasn't sure how long The Judge would need me.

My twins were old enough to be left on their own, but Mike and Michelle both had scout outings for the weekend. When Mike and Michelle had been Steve and Carl, a couple of my fraternity brothers, they had both enjoyed camping out. They had retained their love of the outdoors, making me once again wonder how much of their old personalities had transferred to their new identities. Not that it really mattered. They had been Mike and Michelle, my precious twins for so long now that I seldom thought about their former identities any more than I thought about my own.

Like most mothers, there weren't a lot of people I trusted with little Ashley—especially now that she was toddling around, holding onto the furniture or crawling at ninety miles an hour all over the house. There was simply too much mischief for her to get into now that she was mobile, and I didn't trust just anybody with her.

Then I thought about Myra Smithwick. She had taken care of Ashley before, and like most college students, she could always use a few extra bucks. I called her at her sorority house and struck pay dirt. Myra

didn't have any classes Monday since it was Labor Day, so she was glad to earn a little spending money babysitting.

It was about one when the phone finally rang. My caller ID was going nuts, unable to pin down who was calling or even if anyone was calling. The Judge's calls always did that. I suspected he wasn't really using a phone to call me.

"Your Honor," I answered.

"We need you in my chambers," he said brusquely.

"I'll be there as soon as my babysitter gets here," I replied.

Fortunately, Ovid is a small town, and Myra was there in ten minutes. In her white denim shorts and pink top and her hair tied into a neat ponytail, her schoolbooks clutched to her breasts in feminine fashion, it was nearly impossible for me to think of her as ever being a burly road worker just a few short years before.

"Isn't this a little unusual to be called in on a Sunday?" she asked after I had given her all the standard instructions for handling Ashley.

"Very," I admitted as I searched my purse to make sure I had everything I needed.

"It's nothing bad, is it?" she asked, worried. Myra, of course, remembered who she had been and knew who The Judge really was. She had plenty of reason to be concerned, although she didn't know that for certain and there wasn't much I could tell her.

"Everything is fine," I assured her with a faint smile as I started for the car. I could have added the word "now," but if I had told her what had nearly happened to all of us there in Ovid, she would have had plenty to be concerned about.

It was a beautiful late summer day, and I regretted having such a lovely afternoon taken from me. I couldn't even enjoy it by dressing informally either, for The Judge in his old-fashioned way, would expect all of us in dress fit for his courtroom, even though we would be in his chambers.

It didn't bother me anymore to wear skirts and heels. I had done it for so long now that it seemed perfectly natural to me. And with my body and my trim legs, I knew I could still turn a few heads, in spite of being well into my thirties and the mother of three children. It seemed like an eternity ago that I had been male, so feminine clothing was fine by me. Still, most women would no sooner put on a skirt and heels on their day off than men would choose under like circumstances to wear a tie.

I sighed as I pulled into the parking lot. Other than Officer Mercer's police car, mine was the only vehicle there. Well, at least there was a light court schedule for the week, so I'd be able to leave on time every day. And hopefully, my task today would only take an hour or so.

When I entered The Judge's chambers, several others were already there. The Judge and Officer Mercer's faces were familiar to me, of course, as was the other man's face. I recognized Admiral Nepper, although we had never actually met. I had seen him before in other people's thoughts. Even in a charcoal gray suit, his military bearing exposed him as a senior officer. Given the gods' ability to live among us, I suspected he had been a military officer during other human eras as well.

The only other woman in the room was a young girl, perhaps eleven or so, with long blonde pigtails and braces on her teeth. Most people who knew Diana would never have recognized this child as Diana, the powerful goddess the Greeks called Artemis, but we had been friends long enough that I could recognize her through her twinkling blue eyes (or at least today, they were blue).

I impulsively hugged the girl. When I had drawn back, I smiled. "I see your mission was successful."

"Completely," the girl replied, nodding to Admiral Nepper. The admiral had been imprisoned by enemies of the gods. "Freda Jorgenson is no longer a problem."

"But her organization lives on, Mrs. Patton," Admiral Nepper replied, offering his hand.

I took it. Like all the gods, his handshake was firm and confident.
“Please call me Cindy.”

“Delighted,” he smiled formally. One thing I’ll give most of the male gods. In spite of the way mythology portrays them as randy bastards, the majority of them are polite gentlemen of the old school. It’s often made me wonder what else we’ve gotten wrong regarding them.

“Cindy, I suspect you know why you’re here,” The Judge broke in impatiently.

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Then please begin,” he commanded.

I nodded. Given what had happened yesterday, I needn’t ask whose life the gods wanted to review. Sitting myself in one of The Judge’s comfortable leather chairs, I relaxed my body and slowly drifted off into a trance...

I once thought our story began very late one late spring day as we made our way through an Oklahoma thunderstorm unlike any I had ever seen in my life, but I know now in retrospect that it began months earlier in Washington, D.C. long before winter there had ended. My wife Hannah and I had just arrived at a party at the stately British Embassy on Massachusetts Avenue. This was just before Hannah and I had drifted, for all practical purposes, completely apart, but I was already starting to feel uneasy with my wife’s unbridled ambition and wondered if—or more likely, when—she would decide my complacency was a detriment to her ambition.

While I tried to be supportive as best I could, I’ll admit I felt very out of place in the exquisite ballroom with its Sienna marble columns and crystal chandelier. Hannah had pretty much deserted me as soon as we were greeted at the door by an imposing butler who undoubtedly was in fact, a security man. She was drawn into a conversation with some of her colleagues from work as well as a couple of British officials I took to be part of the MI-6 delegation. It was going to be

shop talk, which meant it was a conversation I'd not be welcome participating in, for while my own security clearance was every bit as stellar as hers, the National Security Agency she worked for dealt in matters we mere mortals were not even aware of. I looked wistfully at my wife, standing there in an elegant black dress that nearly reached the floor. She took to Washington power parties like a fish to water. Not me, though.

That was part of the problem, too. I could at least talk about much of my work, since much of it was public record. Hannah, on the other hand, was involved in the shadowy world of intelligence—much of which was hidden from the public. Her need to keep mum about her job put additional pressures on our already fragile marriage.

While Hannah schmoozed, I contented myself with eating and drinking. Don't take the stories about bad English cooking seriously: the Brits could put on a hell of a party. Of course, more eating led to more drinking, and about five or six drinks later, I was standing away from the action, feeling a little warm as I tried to pull my collar away from my neck.

"Your tie a little tight?" a woman's voice called out from behind me. I turned quickly, nearly spilling the glass of neat bourbon I was nursing to see just who belonged to that sultry voice. I found myself staring at a beautiful blonde woman who was favoring me with an amused smile. "You must be Willis Perry—Hannah's husband."

There were dozens of men circulating around the room in similar black tuxes, so I wondered how she knew it was me. "That would be me, ma'am," I replied with my best attempt at charm. "But how did you know?"

"I'm Freda Jorgenson," she laughed. "I work with your wife."

Of course, not much later, *Newsweek* would run a story on Freda Jorgenson, calling her 'The Ice Queen.' But this was before all of that. I certainly didn't realize I was standing in the presence of one of the soon-to-be most powerful women in Washington. Of course, the Ice Queen description could have been given to her that night, since her

sparkling white dress shimmered like crystals of ice illuminated by a winter sun. There was nothing cold about her incredible face though, unless the blue of her eyes could be called an icy shade. Her face was warm though, and those eyes which would over time bring many powerful men to their knees showed only amusement now.

“Hannah told me you hate these parties,” she went on. “So I just looked for the most uncomfortable man in the room and there you are.”

“It shows, huh?” I muttered.

“I’m afraid so.”

An uncomfortably silent moment later, she asked, “I understand you work for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. What do you do there?”

I shrugged. “A little bit of everything, I suppose. I’m a nuclear engineer, so I spend a lot of time making sure the commercial nuclear reactors in this country are safe.”

“That sounds like interesting work,” she prompted.

“It’s a living,” I allowed. “It’s probably not as exciting as what you and Hannah do over at NSA.” As if I had any idea what they did there. The National Security Agency wasn’t in the habit of telling poor citizens like me exactly what it was up to. Well, I suppose I was playing my own cards pretty close to the chest, too. Over at the NRC we had a few secrets of our own.

I sort of lost time talking to Freda though. I think I did most of the talking, but I enjoyed myself for once since Hannah was occupied, as she was always occupied at parties, trying to meet, greet and enhance her career while leaving me to fend for myself on the sidelines. By the time we left that evening, I had formed quite a positive impression of Hannah’s beautiful co-worker and told Hannah so as we drove home.

“She is impressive,” Hannah agreed. “I’m surprised you noticed, though.”

“Oh?” I detected another argument coming up.

“You never seem to have much confidence in the abilities of women,” she elaborated, obviously trying to sting me. “And Freda is a very strong woman, she’s going places—and soon.”

“We didn’t talk about her work,” I pointed out. “Exactly what does she do?”

“Well, much of her work is classified,” Hannah told me smugly. I had been expecting that. “All I can tell you is that she’s a very powerful woman, and I’m very pleased to be working with her.”

“I’m sure you are,” I agreed, relieved that the anticipated argument had been blunted the minute Hannah found an opportunity to once again lord it over me about how important her job was.

If it sounds as if Hannah and I were having serious marital problems—all I can say is ‘got it in one.’ I think it all started right after Hannah found out she was barren. Before that, our marriage had been just fine, but once she learned she could never bear children, her focus turned away from family toward her career. It was a complete change of priorities, and one that I hadn’t really realized had happened until our relationship had been severely damaged.

That had been two years earlier, and each day had moved us further and further apart. Until she found out she couldn’t have children, we had sex often and spontaneously. That had changed to once a week at what had become an almost scheduled time. Lately, we had made love very seldom, the last time being two months before the party where I met Freda Jorgenson. By the time we found ourselves lost in Oklahoma, buffeted by a legendary Midwestern thunderstorm, it had been over five months since we had made love.

There was no doubt that our marriage had come to a bitter end. We had become more like roommates than a couple, and had it not been for the sudden and unexpected death of her Uncle Fred, a man she had loved greatly and I had admired as well, we would probably have already discussed the divorce we both knew was inevitable.

Why hadn't we already split the sheets in fact as well as in deed? I'm not really sure about Hannah's motives. As for my own, I was probably reluctant to let a twelve-year investment in each other go up in smoke unless Hannah said that was what she wanted. Maybe she felt the same way and was waiting for me to make the first move.

Although neither of us would bring up the 'D' word, it didn't keep us from participating in rousing arguments, such as the one we found ourselves in after attending Uncle Fred's funeral in a little jerkwater burg in the hills of eastern Oklahoma.

"You should stop and ask for directions," Hannah said firmly, peering out the windshield at the ugly-looking mass of dark clouds rising to the west of us—or at least I thought they were to the west of us.

My hands gripped the wheel tighter in frustration. "And just who would I ask?" I replied caustically. "The highest life form I've seen in the last half hour is a cow."

"Maybe it's because you've been doubling back."

"I have not!" Although to be honest, I had lost track of the turns I had made from one dusty back road to the next. 'I certainly should have hit the Interstate by now,' I thought to myself, although I was loathe to admit it to Hannah. If I had had the sun to help me determine which way I was going, I might have been okay. But given the gray pallor of the skies, I honestly couldn't tell where the sun was to determine my direction.

"We're going to miss our plane," she sulked. "And I have an important meeting with Freda first thing tomorrow morning."

"We'll get back to Washington on time," I assured her. "If we can't get into National (I refused to call it Reagan more out of habit than politics), we'll catch a flight into Dulles or BWI."

"But what about our car? It's at National."

"Don't worry about the damned car," I growled.

Any retort she might have planned was cut off by a sudden crack of lightning and a loud rumble of thunder right on its heels.

“The storm’s getting closer,” she commented. Who needed Cassandra when Hannah was at hand?

It was indeed closer—and more violent. We had watched the sky growing ominously darker—first at a distance and then closer and closer. Speckles of rain were dotting the windshield now, but not enough to justify turning on the wipers. A few miles ahead of us though, the horizon was lost in a dark, steady stream of rain whipped by violent winds.

“Do you think it’s a tornado?” Hannah asked, frightened.

“No, it’s just rain,” I replied authoritatively. In truth, the cloud could have spawned a dozen tornadoes and we wouldn’t have been able to see them. I had been born and raised in New England, but I knew enough about tornadoes from my travels to know they weren’t always visible like they usually are in the movies. Often, they’re hidden well within clouds—maybe even clouds like the one we were about to dive into.

Then suddenly, the storm was really upon us. It was as if a curtain of water instantly closed on us, battering the top of the car like pebbles on a sheet of tin.

“That’s hail,” Hannah observed, now beyond frightened and on to terrified.

“Not quite,” I countered, watching as huge drops slammed into the windshield in such profusion that the wipers were nearly worthless. The rental car’s lights flashed on suddenly, but were practically useless with more of the beam reflecting off the stream of rain than off the blacktop of the road.

“Pull over to the side of the road!” Hannah demanded. I might have done just that if I had been alone, but moments before, she had been goading me to hurry so we could catch our plane. If she wanted me to hurry, she was going to have to accept the consequences. I ignored her and pressed on.

“You’re going to get us killed!” she screamed as the storm intensified.

Again, I ignored her.

As luck would have it, she would have been right—and nearly was anyway—if it hadn't been for the sudden image of a police car blocking the lane ahead, its red and blue flashers piercing through the downpour. In spite of the flashing lights' warning, I almost wasn't able to stop in time, the rental car's brakes being far inferior to those on my Volvo at home. I had visions of hitting the police officer, who stood motionless in the path between our car and his own, his yellow rain slicker blowing in the stiff wind.

Once stopped, I managed to get my window down part way. Thankfully, the rain was blowing away from the open window. "What's the problem, Officer?" I yelled to be heard over the din of the rain and wind.

The police officer leaned over, closer to the window. It was then that I noticed two very strange things about him. First—and most obvious—he was wearing those mirrored sunglasses favored by law enforcement officers everywhere. What made it unusual is that with the storm, it was almost as dim as twilight outside. How he could see through the mirrored glasses was beyond me. The other strange item was something about his rain slicker. At first, I couldn't figure out what was wrong, but at last I had it—in spite of a driving rain, his slicker looked completely dry. I passed it off quickly as some new miracle fabric that resisted moisture.

"The bridge ahead is unsafe," the officer told me in a flat, emotionless voice.

I looked beyond the police car stretched across the road at the metal span single truss bridge crossing a swollen river below. "It looks fine to me."

"A tornado passed through here a few minutes ago," he informed me. "It weakened the bridge."

As if on cue, the bridge groaned in a sudden burst of wind. A small support beam broke loose. Too heavy to fly through the air, it dived over the side of the bridge toward the river below.

“I see what you mean,” I allowed.

“What is it?” Hannah pestered me.

“Unsafe bridge,” I muttered, turning back to the officer before Hannah could waste time by informing me that we were going to miss our plane.

“And I’m going to have to have you follow me back into town,” he added.

“What for?”

“You were approaching the bridge too fast. I’m going to have to issue you a citation for driving at an unsafe speed for road conditions.”

“What? That’s ridiculous!”

I knew better than to bluster, but I couldn’t help it. Hannah had been pestering me since we got into the car. The storm had made driving a tense and unpleasant experience. Now, a small-town cop thought he could make a little traffic fine money from an out-of-town traveller. I knew the type. We had them in small towns back in New England where I grew up, and we had them in suburban Washington as well.

“Look,” I began, hoping I might be able to just slip him a few dollars and get back on our way—assuming I could find an open road, “if there’s going to be fine, why don’t I just pay you now and save us all some time?”

“Are you trying to bribe a police officer, sir?” he asked in that same flat tone.

“No, of course not. I just thought...”

“Then follow me please, sir.”

He walked away without waiting for an answer. I noticed the side of his car was emblazoned with ‘Police—City of Ovid.’ I suddenly wondered if he could make the charge stick, given that as near as I could tell, we weren’t inside the city limits of any town. I quickly dismissed that idea, though. I knew some little towns annexed a lot of undeveloped land just to add it to the town tax rolls and trap wary

drivers like me.

“Did I hear him say we have to follow him?” Hannah asked.

“Apparently he’s charging me with a traffic violation,” I growled. Before Hannah could open her mouth again (which she was about to do), I added, “And don’t tell me about how we have to get back to Washington.”

Fortunately, she had the good sense to keep her mouth shut.

As nearly as I could tell, the town of Ovid was a good two miles from the bridge. I noticed we passed a city limits sign no more than a half mile from any evidence of a developed town. I knew better than to point this out to some local judge, though. I’d probably just be told that the town limits had been changed but that they hadn’t bothered to change the signs yet. My best course of action was to pay the damned fine and be done with it.

I had a lot to brood about as I followed that tank-town cop into the ‘city’ of Ovid. Hannah was pissed at me—as usual. We’d undoubtedly miss our plane, and like Hannah, I had plenty of work piling up on my desk back in DC. I was going to out probably a hundred bucks on a trumped up charge, and unless this phony-baloney legal charade ended in a hurry, we’d probably be stuck in some fleabag motel in Ovid eating greasy fried food that seemed to pass for haute cuisine in Oklahoma.

At least the weather wasn’t as threatening, I told myself. I had turned my wipers down to intermittent since the driving storm had miraculously changed to a gentle rain as we neared Ovid. In fact, unlike the countryside we had just driven through which was strewn with windswept branches and waterlogged plants, Ovid looked as if it had been completely spared the more violent aspects of the storm. Instead, lawns and leaves glistened with abundant but gentle rainfall.

And in spite of my determination to dislike Ovid on sight, I had to admit to myself it was fairly pleasant as small towns go. Since I had grown up in the small city of Portland, Maine, I was very aware of the dynamics of small towns. If things looked prosperous in a small town,

it meant something besides farming or fishing was driving the economy. Ovid had that prosperous look that said there was something in town—a business or a college, perhaps, or both—which provided good jobs and a passion for liveability. Ovid's oak-lined streets populated by neat and trim if modest houses screamed prosperity. I found myself wondering what there was in the town to drive the economy.

When we pulled up in front of a building proclaiming itself to be 'City Hall,' I realized Ovid was larger than I had first imagined. Considering that I had seen no signs directing us to Ovid as we had wandered through the Oklahoma countryside, I had imagined it was a tiny, dying farm town where traffic fines were the greatest single source of town revenue. Instead, it was neat, prosperous, and showed signs of growth—a rare aspect for isolated small towns anywhere in the country.

"Follow me," the police officer directed. He had taken off his rain slicker, exposing a neat, sharply-creased grayish-blue uniform shirt. I noted that in spite of the light rain, the shirt showed no sign of being wet. Whatever fabrics were being used for uniforms in this town, they seemed completely resistant to the elements. I made a mental note to find out what they were and order a dozen shirts out of it when I got back to Washington.

"I know you don't want to hear it," Hannah muttered to me softly enough not to be heard by the officer, "but we're never going to make our plane now."

"I'm well aware of that!" I snapped.

"I told you that you were going the wrong way," she pressed, but I refused to be drawn into her potential tirade.

"This way," the officer said, motioning for us to enter a courtroom.

Like the rest of what I had seen of Ovid, the courtroom was rather impressive. Of course, if they hauled in many hapless drivers like me on trumped-up charges, I supposed they could easily afford impressive courtrooms.

A judge was already sitting on the bench. I could see he was going to be trouble. He had a stern look about him, from his piercing blue eyes to the way he held himself, leaning imperiously over the bench to look down on a trembling girl who could have been no more than eight.

“Jeez, did she forget to pay sales taxes at her lemonade stand?” I whispered to Hannah. She didn’t reply but gave me a stern look as if to warn me I was in enough trouble without pissing off the judge.

“Is this form more to your liking?” the judge asked sternly, his thin lips pursed amid a neatly trimmed beard.

“But I...” the little girl began, tugging at her tiny skirt as if embarrassed to have anyone see her legs.

“But nothing, Ms. Amstrad,” the judge interrupted. “You have been warned about bullying the younger children.”

The little wisp of a girl didn’t look big enough or old enough to bully anyone, I thought to myself, wondering what she could have possibly done to make the judge so angry. His mood seemed far out of proportion to the diminutive girl before him.

“Your parents are waiting outside,” he growled, motioning for our police escort to open the door we had just come through.

I wondered where they could be since I had seen no one on our way into the courtroom. Imagine my surprise when a young couple burst through the very doors we had just come through. Like the little girl, they were slender and blonde, but there was something odd about them. Somehow, through some trick of the light perhaps, it seemed as if I could almost see through them.

“Lisa!” the woman called, causing the girl to turn and face us. I could see her eyes were red-rimmed—presumably from crying—and the look on her face was one of pure horror. Before she could speak, the woman wrapped her arms around the little girl, crying softly.

“Thank you, Your Honor,” the man said as he placed his hands on his wife and daughter’s shoulders. “It’s not like Lisa to run off like that. We were so worried.”

The judge's demeanor was very different now, a smile across his face in a gesture of benevolence. "I'm sure you're right, Mr. Amstrad. I've warned Lisa not to go wandering off like that while her parents are shopping. I'm sure she won't do it again."

As the little girl was led away by her strange parents, I could see the little girl turning to look at the judge with pleading eyes. But the judge had already turned his attention to Hannah and me.

"Next case, Officer Mercer," he boomed from the bench.

For a moment, I felt a twinge of what the accused must feel like in countries where trials were held in secret. There were only the four of us in the courtroom—Hannah and me and the judge and the police officer he referred to as "Officer Mercer." There were no court reporters, no true bailiff, or any spectators to indicate that this was a true courtroom. Still, the presence of this judge was almost regal. His black robe might just as well have been an ermine robe draped about a powerful king.

"Your Honor..." I began.

"Court is still in session," Officer Mercer intoned. "The Honorable Judge presiding." His emphasis on the word "Judge" led me believe it was almost a name as well as a title.

The Judge's courtroom is different nowadays from what I've been told. Cindy Patton attends all court proceedings, but she was just a shade when we met the Judge, presumably not necessary in the courtroom. And of course now, Susan Jager is there to provide some semblance of defense for poor wayfarers like Hannah and me. In those days though, things were a little less civilized. And I suspect The Judge was far less constrained by protocol then.

"Willis and Hannah Perry," the Judge stated. It wasn't a question: he knew who we were. I assumed that Officer Mercer had called ahead, giving the Judge our names. "You have been charged with driving at an unsafe speed for road conditions. How do you plead?"

I had walked into the courtroom determined to just pay my fine and

leave. Unfortunately, I had had time to think about that as we made our way to the Judge's court. Now, I wasn't so sure I wanted to plead guilty. To tell the truth, I was getting more than a little pissed off at the Judge's arrogance.

"How do you plead?" he asked again.

"Not guilty!" I replied at last, ignoring my wife's sudden gasp.

The Judge turned to Officer Mercer. "Tell what happened."

Officer Mercer faced the bench. I noted he was still wearing those mirrored sunglasses. "Mr. Perry's car approached the Lethe River Bridge at a high rate of speed..."

High rate of speed my ass!

"...nearly colliding with my vehicle."

"It wasn't like that..." I began.

"Silence!" The Judge ordered. As Hannah tugged on my sleeve, shooting darts at me with her eyes, I said no more.

"In your opinion," The Judge asked, "what would have happened if your car had not been blocking the road?"

"Then Mr. Perry's car would have gone onto the bridge which was severely weakened by a tornado. The results would have been the death of Mr. Perry and his wife."

I almost pointed out that Officer Mercer was in no position to know that. It's just as well I saved my outburst. And, of course, as things turned out, he probably was in a position to know that we would have died since that's how things work in Ovid. We knew none of that, standing there before The Judge though.

"Then I would call that driving at an unsafe speed," the Judge commented. "I find you guilty as charged."

I wanted to say something, but I knew it wouldn't do me any good. I was back to my earlier plan now—just shut up and pay the fine. Oh if only things had been that simple!

As I reached back for my wallet to pay the expected fine, The Judge rose and began to chant something in some language I had never heard before. It sounded a little like Latin, but I wasn't sure. Maybe it was because we don't really know what spoken Latin sounded like back when The Judge learned it—but I'm getting ahead of myself there.

I felt very strange—almost as if my body had become incorporeal, my flesh replaced by a series of tingling, almost electrical, sensations. I looked down at myself as best I could, but my motions seemed to be slowed considerably. When I managed to get a view of myself, my body was shifting inside my clothing, almost as if it were melting and reforming.

I suppose I should have been frightened, but I was too much in shock to feel any real fear. Or perhaps what The Judge was doing to me included some sort of calmative. Whatever the reason, I was curiously detached as I watched my chest begin to change under the polo shirt I was wearing. With each labored breath, my rib cage seemed to be growing smaller while two obviously feminine breasts began to form and expand beneath my shirt.

I looked over at Hannah. She was staring back at me, her eyes conveying a wordless panic as her body seemed to shimmer and shift in the same way mine was. She seemed to be growing larger, while I, on the other hand, seemed to be growing smaller until we were eye to eye. That only lasted a moment though, as suddenly, she was taller than I was, and the changes to her body were becoming more systematic.

I had seen examples of morphing programs back then, although they weren't as widespread or as seamless as they are today. Hannah looked as if her image had been captured by such a program, although a program as elaborate as the ones today, as her dark brown hair shortened, pulling back from over her shoulders until it had become a short and neatly-trimmed man's cut in a shade of dark blond. Her face was broadening, her nose growing more pronounced, and I could see a dark shadow appearing on her cheeks and chin, reminding me of a man's whiskers a few hours after shaving. My God!

I realized, they actually were whiskers!

Her body broadened out, her narrow waist filling in as the shape of her breasts disappeared into a broad chest. Her tee top was changing as well, to accommodate her new shape. It developed narrow stripes and became a short sleeve dress shirt. Along the front of the shirt, blue and red stripes began to form as a strip of cloth snaked down from her neck in the shape of a dark blue tie.

I was so engrossed in Hannah's changes that I almost didn't notice the further changes to my own body and clothing. I say almost, because as shocking as the changes happening to my wife, I could not only see but feel the ones happening to me.

How can I possibly describe the sensations bombarding me in that unreal courtroom? My waist felt as if it was being squeezed into a much smaller circumference (which it was), and the excess volume of my body seemed partially at least to be pushed toward my chest and my hips. I could feel hair trickling down over my neck, and even feel its sudden weight on my shoulders.

Although my eyes were riveted on my wife's increasingly masculine form, I had no doubts that my own shape was now much more feminine. I even winced slightly as the sexual equipment between my legs became suddenly conspicuous by its very absence, somehow drawing up between my legs and reshaping itself into something completely alien to me.

It's difficult to describe with any detachment what it feels like to have one's sexual organs rearranged. I suppose most men are aware of having something between their legs, pressing against the insides of their thighs and pushed against their bodies by the constraints of underwear. Imagine these sensations suddenly taken away, replaced by an absence of any external organs, yet even in that absence, a sensation remains. As strange as it sounds, I could feel the slit that had formed between my legs. In that moment, I felt suddenly vulnerable, as if a doorway between my thighs had been opened, leaving me somehow exposed.

I was at least a foot shorter than Hannah now, but suddenly, I seemed to grow slightly. I realized as I stumbled slightly to catch my balance that I was now poised on something which had raised my heels off the floor. A sudden slight cramping in my toes told me before I even could look down, that I was now wearing women's shoes—high heels, no less.

The rest of my clothing appeared to be changing as well. Just as Hannah was now dressed in the sort of outfit any man might be expected to wear to work, my own clothing was becoming a woman's equivalent. I felt the strange but not exactly unpleasant sensation of nylons running up my leg, and the feeling of air on my legs where my pants were rapidly disappearing.

Something wrapped itself around my chest, encasing my... breasts. Yes, breasts—I now realized I had breasts. The something, I instinctively knew, was a bra. I could feel it cinching against my shoulder blades, adjusting as the new growths on my chest reached their final size.

I knew from a number of years of looking at women that my new breasts weren't exactly mouth-watering in size. I was probably in the B cup range and maybe a 32 or so. Hannah had been a 34C which I knew was significantly larger. In spite of that, my new breasts felt strangely heavy on my diminished chest. At least the bra gave some relief to the tugging of my new breasts.

My shirt had merged with my transformed trousers, becoming a flowery summer dress, cream in color with a neckline designed to show off my new cleavage. I watched too numb to move, as long, medium brown hair crept over my partially-bare shoulders framing my new breasts.

"What the hell have you done to me?" I screamed, trying to make my voice sound threatening but succeeding only in emulating the sound of a frightened female—which come to think of it, was exactly what I had become.

Hannah—or rather the man Hannah had become—placed a meaty hand

on my arm. “Now Martha, it’s only a speeding ticket. The Judge was really pretty lenient.”

Martha? Who the hell was Martha? I looked at Hannah, staring into the calm, masculine face of a stranger. A good head taller than me, he wore a blue sports coat with a conservative but trendy blue tie, white shirt striped in blue and red, and khaki slacks. To my alarm, he seemed quite comfortable in them.

“What’s going on here?” I yelled, turning to The Judge.

The Judge in response waved his hand absently, freezing my now-masculinized wife in place. “I think it should be obvious to you,” he replied calmly. “You are now Martha Lee Hamilton, the wife of Kenny Hamilton.”

“I’m Willis Perry, and I’m nobody’s wife!” I shot back.

“Yes, you are,” he insisted. “You are mine to do with as I please since your own lives would have ended at the Lethe River Bridge a few hours ago. It had been severely weakened by a tornado and would have collapsed as you travelled over it.”

“You can’t know that,” I protested, folding my arms over my chest in a vain effort to hide my breasts.

“But I can,” he replied simply. “And I do know it.”

As he stared at me, I could hear screams in my mind—screams from Hannah and me as water rushed into our car and tons of concrete closed in over us. I shuddered, somehow knowing that what this strange magistrate had just told me was absolute truth.

“Even if that would have happened, you have no right to do... this to us!”

“I won’t argue that point with you,” The Judge said calmly. “Simply look at this as a second chance.”

“Second chance at what?”

The Judge shrugged. “Life, marriage, career, anything you can think of. Your life would have ended and your marriage was about to fail

even if you had both lived. As for your career, were you really all that happy being just another bureaucrat in Washington?"

I didn't answer. I had to admit that my career hadn't given me the satisfaction I had once expected, and as for my marriage... well, it was probably as dead as we would have been if we had crossed that bridge. Still, I wasn't tired of being a man, and I had no desire whatsoever to spend a new life as a woman.

"Okay," I finally allowed. "You have a point. Just make me a man and Hannah a woman again and we'll try out these new lives you gave us."

The Judge smiled thinly. "It doesn't work that way, Mrs. Hamilton. Your wife's ambition would be your undoing, as it nearly was in your previous marriage to her. As a man—even though he no longer retains his memories of his life as your wife—he will be much happier—and will make you happier in the process."

"Bullshit!"

I thought for a moment I had overstepped my bounds with The Judge. His face hardened and there seemed to be fire burning in his eyes. Even the stoic Officer Mercer looked alarmed at my outburst. What the hell was I thinking? I had just called a being powerful enough to change my sex as I stood there a liar.

"I... I'm sorry," I said meekly. Of course, I wasn't really sorry, but I had a strange feeling any being capable of changing me into a woman could change me into something considerably more unpleasant than that.

The Judge's expression softened a little. "Officer Mercer will take you and your husband to your respective places of work. Don't forget your jacket and purse." With a nod, he indicated a blue jacket designed to be worn over my dress to appear more businesslike and a navy blue purse. Both items were sitting on the chair I had been sitting in a few minutes before. "Have a good life, Mrs. Hamilton."

We were trapped, I reflected as we got into the back seat of Officer

Mercer's police car. I had already noted that our rental car had mysteriously disappeared from the parking lot. Hannah and I were now in new bodies—of opposite sexes, no less—and I had managed singlehandedly to piss off the one person who might be able to return us to our rightful bodies.

I felt as if we had been flung into a Dean Koontz novel in one of his spooky little towns where nothing was quite right. And in fact, nothing really was quite right. Oh, this Ovid was a pleasant enough town—actually more prosperous than the small towns I remembered from my time growing up in New England. But there was something unnatural about it as well.

Most disturbing were the people I could almost but not quite see through. They weren't exactly ghostly, but it was as if their images had been poorly superimposed over the background. No one solid seemed to notice there was anything wrong with these people though. Or perhaps they just chose to ignore it.

Also, although there were new cars and evidence of modern devices everywhere, people dressed with a formality that gave the town an artificial look—men wore suits and ties while women wore skirts and heels. There was nothing old-fashioned about their attire. Instead, the styles they wore wouldn't be out of place in Boston or Washington. It was as if someone was making a film for the Ovid Chamber of Commerce and had asked everyone to wear their Sunday best.

Hannah—or I supposed I would have to start calling my wife “Kenny” now—smiled happily, oblivious to my discomfort. Maybe she—he—was the lucky one, I thought. According to The Judge, he had no idea he had ever been anyone else.

Or maybe not. As disconcerting as my changes were, I was still me at some base level. If I had lost all my memories, it would be the same as dying. At least I was still aware of who I had been and could strive to get my old body and life back. That was far better than thinking I had always been Martha Lee Hamilton.

Officer Mercer dropped Kenny off first. A block east of the main street

(called appropriately enough 'Main Street') were a collection of businesses that didn't need to be accessible to strolling shoppers—a paint store, an auto parts store, and lastly our destination: Ovid Chrysler. A small selection of new Chryslers and Dodges were displayed prominently in front of the building, with a larger selection of used vehicles off to one side. Judging from the way Kenny was dressed, I thought it likely he was a salesman. I couldn't help but chuckle to myself. Hannah would have died a thousand deaths rather than face the loss of prestige of becoming a car salesman.

"Bye hon," Kenny said, surprising me with a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for the ride Officer," he added as he closed the door with a wave.

It would be my turn next, I realized. Unlike my ersatz husband, I had no idea what I did for a living—or where. I thought about asking Officer Mercer, but I decided to save my breath. There was no way he would tell me anything. He seemed to revel in playing the strong, silent type.

In a few moments, we had pulled up in front of a prominent (for Ovid at least) building displaying a sign that announced it to be the 'Farmers' and Merchants' Bank.' "This is your stop," Officer Mercer informed me.

"A bank?" I murmured. "I work in a bank? But I don't know anything about banking."

"That doesn't really matter," he informed me in the deadpan delivery I was coming to expect. "You'll learn."

It was no use arguing. I sighed, grabbed my jacket and purse, and tried to make a graceful if not entirely ladylike exit from the car. For my first time exiting a car in a skirt and heels, I didn't think I had done too badly. I managed to keep everything that wasn't supposed to show from showing, at least.

I felt as if I was entering a trap as I entered the bank. What would I do once I entered? Was I a teller? God, I hoped not. I didn't have the slightest idea how to be a teller. Besides, tellers were supposed to be cheerful all day, and I didn't feel very cheerful at that moment.

Was I a secretary? I might be able to handle that. I was a fairly decent typist. Since all the budget cuts at NRC after the fall of the Soviet Union, we never seemed to have enough clerical help, so in self-defense, I had become a halfway-decent typist. But if I was a secretary, where in the bank did I work and who did I work for?

I half-expected everyone in the bank to break out laughing when I entered, stupidly looking around as if I had no idea where I was supposed to be, but to my relief, no one did. In fact, no one seemed to take much notice of me at all. That probably meant I wasn't somebody really important.

I scanned the main lobby of the bank. It was arranged like most small town banks I had seen before, with a line of teller stations on one side and a series of desks on the other and a small number of offices for the bank's executives at the rear. The décor was more modern than I had expected, denoting a successful and presumably forward-thinking bank. Nothing was ostentatious mind you, but the desks were of polished wood and the desk chairs comfortable-looking.

With some relief, I noticed an empty desk along the sidewall with a wooden nameplate atop it that included my name with 'Home Loan Department' in smaller letters right under it.

Home Loan Department? But I didn't know anything about home loans, other than as a customer. Hannah and I had owned a house back in Virginia, but like most homeowners, I had merely skimmed all the papers when we bought the house and signed where I was told to sign. I had no idea of how to put together a home loan. How was I going to handle this?

Since it appeared that I had no choice except to try to play the role The Judge had saddled me with, I sighed and walked over to 'my' desk, removing my jacket and draping it over the back of my chair. Nervously, I sat down with what I hoped was a friendly nod to the transparent girl at the next desk.

Actually, most of the people in the bank—customers and employees alike—were semi-transparent. From where I was sitting, I could only

see one other solid person. Two desks away, a cute young redhead was talking with a customer, but I noticed she looked my way once and gave me what I hoped was a knowing nod before returning to her customer. As soon as she was finished with her client, I resolved to introduce myself. Well, I suppose ‘introduce’ wasn’t quite right since she already knew me—or at least thought she did. Good Lord, this new life in Ovid was going to be confusing!

Since I had no customers at my desk—thankfully—I busied myself by going through a file or two in my in-basket. As I’ve already mentioned, as a home owner, I was only vaguely familiar with many of the documents, although I supposed they were somewhat different due to differences in real estate law between Oklahoma and Virginia where I owned—or rather had owned—a home.

I was relieved to find I was at least vaguely familiar with most of the forms. Deeds, loan documents, and personal financial statements are at least somewhat familiar to anyone who has ever bought a house. I just hoped I didn’t have to explain any of the details to anybody. I tried to remember back when Hannah and I had purchased our home. The girl who did what I was expected to do now hadn’t seemed to get bogged down in the details. I suspected at the time that others in her organization actually did most of the technical work, leaving it to her to make the borrowers comfortable with the idea that all of the details were being handled for them.

After I had studied the files for about twenty minutes, the redhead finished with her customer. Before I could go to her desk though, she came to mine. “I’ve got a couple of prospects for you,” she told me blandly. “Can we go over them in the conference room?”

The way she said it, I knew she wanted to discuss something other than loan prospects. I nodded, picking up a notepad just to make it look as if I was going to be taking down some information.

When she had closed the conference room door and we were both seated, she smiled, crinkling her pretty little freckles as she did. “Welcome to Ovid.”

“So you know?” I sighed, relieved.

“The same thing happened to me about six months ago,” she explained, extending her hand. “I’m Connie Delany,” she added.

“I guess I’m Martha Hamilton,” I replied, taking her hand while noting that it was about the same size as mine. It looked as if our femininely-shaped nails had been done by the same manicurist as well. “But I guess you already knew that.”

She smiled again. “Sure did. You’re my best friend here at the bank—or at least you were when you were a shade.”

“A shade?”

“The people you can sort of see through,” she explained. She went on to tell me something of how Ovid worked. It seemed that almost everyone who was not transparent in Ovid had been transformed by the mysterious Judge. Most of the people were shades, though. You could see them, talk to them, touch them—even smell them—but when you looked at them, there was something almost but not quite transparent about them. Eventually, some of the shades were replaced by real people who had been transformed by The Judge.

“You’ll get used to the shades after awhile,” Connie assured me. “After a time, they just seem like normal people. I guess our minds just fill in the places where you can see through them.”

“Do they know they’re shades?” I asked.

“In Ovid, you can never be absolutely certain of anything,” Connie cautioned me. “But I don’t think so. They think they are just people. Most of us who remember who we are think they’re just more of The Judge’s magic.”

Time for the big question: “So who is The Judge anyhow?”

Connie gave me a wistful smile. “I know, and I wish I could tell you, but you’ll figure it out on your own after awhile.”

Before I could ask anything else, a shade who I later learned was Judy Cartwright, secretary to the president of the bank popped in.

“Martha Lee, your two o’clock appointment is here.”

“Ask them to wait just a minute,” Connie answered before I could say anything. “I’ll bring them back.”

Judy nodded and closed the door behind her.

“Martha Lee?” I asked. Calling someone by their first and middle names was so Southern. Of course, come to think about it, I and almost everyone else did seem to have just a little bit of a Southern twang when we spoke. For a native New Englander, I felt almost like a traitor to have a twang.

“It’s what we all call you,” Connie said quickly. “Right now, we’ve got a customer.”

“But I don’t know what to do!”

“I do,” she assured me. “Supposedly, you and I are cross-trained to take over for each other on vacations and so on. Just follow my lead.”

With Connie’s help, I actually managed to go through a loan closing for Fred and Allison Manchester without seeming like a total idiot. I think their real estate agent was a little suspicious, but Connie managed to whisper to me that he was one of us in that he remembered his previous life as well. I later found out that he had previously been a State Patrol officer (a male officer—lucky stiff for being able to stay male) and had been in Ovid for about four months.

Connie was right about the shades, though. The Manchesters were shades: yet they acted just like normal people. When I accidentally touched Allison’s hand, it felt as solid as my own. And in addition to being solid to the touch, they had no problem drinking the Cokes we had brought into the conference room. I could see why Ovid residents treated them as normal people and vowed to myself to do likewise.

It took an hour to go through all of the paperwork, but at last we were finished and the Manchesters were on their way to move into their new house. I guess they were so happy to get their new home that they didn’t suspect that I was as new to the whole process as they were.

“See?” Connie said brightly. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“No,” I admitted. Considering my previous life had been spent reviewing documents related to nuclear weapons safety (an oxymoron if even there was one—how could a nuclear weapon be ‘safe’?), home loan documents were a snap.

“I checked your schedule when I went out to get your customers,” Connie went on. “You don’t have another closing for a couple of days. By that time, I’ll have you completely up to speed. We can spend the time showing you how to get documents ready for the loan committee.”

I felt relieved at that. If I was going to be stuck in this new life, I’d need a job, and this looked like a decent one. I didn’t want to screw it up.

“Right now, things are kind of quiet,” Connie pointed out. “Let’s take you to the ladies’ room so I can teach you how to touch up your makeup.”

“I’m wearing makeup?”

“Of course, silly,” she giggled. “All girls wear it.”

I really hadn’t noticed. I guess part of the reason was that I didn’t really need much. Looking at myself in the mirror of the ladies’ room for the first time, I could see that I had smooth skin with just a small number of cute little freckles around my nose, full lips, and a natural blush that highlighted my cheeks. My face was framed by long, brown hair that curled just a little near its shoulder-length ends. By my own male standards, I was cute—not a raving beauty mind you, but downright cute. My figure was trim and my features attractive, but in a ‘girl next door’ sort of way rather than anything spectacularly gorgeous. I had already sneaked a look at my driver’s license to find I was twenty-two. At least I was fifteen years younger than I had been as Willis Perry.

Connie showed me the basics of applying lipstick and checking my makeup. “If you just relax and let your mind drift while you’re looking in the mirror, something about the magic will cause you to take care of

your makeup unconsciously, but I think you'll find after awhile that it's better to control the process yourself. It's a little spooky to let your body do it for you automatically."

"I don't know if I'll ever get this right," I complained.

"Sure you will," she replied brightly. "It only takes a couple of days for most people. I was a little slow, but I had it down within a week."

"You used to be a man?" I asked incredulously. Connie had seemed so comfortable being a woman that I never would have guessed that she had ever been a man.

"Yep," she replied with a grin and a nod. "I was a middle-aged, divorced accountant for the State of Oklahoma. I came out this way to do a little hunting last fall and found Ovid instead. Apparently, I was due to die in a hunting accident, so I was fair game for The Judge. Enough about that, though. Let's wipe off that lipstick and try again."

So with Connie's assistance and guidance, I managed to make it through my first day at work. The only problem was that I had only spent part of the day in women's clothing, and yet by the end of the day, my feet felt cramped in their high heels, my legs were too warm in the clinging pantyhose, and my bra had ridden up on me a couple of times, requiring minor adjustments in the ladies' room.

So by the end of the day, I was tired, hot, and cranky. All I wanted to do was find my way home—or I should say to Martha Lee's home—and crash. Connie was good enough to walk me to my car, which turned out to be a one-year-old white Dodge Stratus. I supposed with my 'husband' selling Chrysler products, having a fairly new Dodge made sense. At least it was three years newer than the Volvo I had owned as Willis Perry—although I hadn't owned an American car in several years because I felt Volvos were a lot better. Add to that the fact that Chrysler controls are substantially different from the ones on my Volvo, so it took me half of my short trip home just to find out how to work the radio.

Connie gave me directions to my house. It wasn't hard to find since Ovid was a pretty small town. The house turned out to be a modest

little home—a ranch maybe ten years old, judging from the growth of the vegetation in the yard. Well, as long as it was air-conditioned and had a comfortable couch for me to crash on, I'd be happy, I thought.

Thankfully, the house was cool with the air-conditioning humming happily along. I spent a little time looking around. It was your typical three-bedroom ranch with a living room, family room, kitchen, and a couple of bathrooms. None of the rooms could be called spacious, but I suppose it could be deemed cosy. Having grown up in a small town, I realized that while not pretentious, the house and its comfortable furnishings indicated we were doing fairly well financially.

I stripped out of my work clothes after finding some khaki shorts and a pale green tank top. I didn't even stop to investigate my new body after I had stripped down into my bra and panties. Frankly, I wasn't in an exploratory mood. I couldn't help noticing though, that I had a trim, well-built body. I might have even thought of it as being sexy if I hadn't been so mind-numbingly tired. I'd save the body tour for later, though.

Once dressed, I located the prerequisite comfortable couch. It was in the den, which was on the east side of the house, so it was a little darker and cooler than the living room on the west side. As I prepared to lie down, I noticed a photo album on a nearby end table. The book was white, trimmed in silver, and embossed with the words 'Our Wedding.' There was a date embossed on it, too...

Oh shit. We were newlyweds.

In spite of learning how young I was, I had thought of my forced marriage to Kenny as just a reversed continuation of my marriage with Hannah. Since Hannah and I had gone for months without sexual contact, I hadn't really considered the ramifications of relations with my 'husband.' Upon learning that I was, for all practical purposes, a newlywed, I thought back to the time when Hannah and I had first gotten married. Once a day was a minimum for sex in those days. What would Kenny be expecting?

With trembling hands, I opened the album. I told myself it was just to learn more about the person I was supposed to be, but that failed to

calm me down completely, as thoughts of sex as a woman kept intruding on my mind. The album did tell me several things about my new life. Through attached newspaper clippings, I learned my parents and younger sister lived in Muskogee, Oklahoma. There were some pictures of them, and they all looked happy and attractive. Did they really exist, though, or were they just convenient pictures of people who were far enough away from Ovid not to matter in my new life?

My unwanted husband looked proud and happy in a picture taken with a fifty-something couple I assumed to be his parents. I had to admit my former wife's new male body looked very handsome in his dark tuxedo. At least The Judge had made us both attractive. I could even detect hints of Hannah's expressions translated to Kenny's masculine face. It made me wonder if in spite of the radical transformation and apparent loss of memory he had experienced, something of Hannah somehow remained.

There were dozens of other pictures as well—friends, groomsmen, bridesmaids, and so on. Some of the pictures were captioned while others were not. Oddly enough, none of the pictures showed any of the wedding guests to be shades. Perhaps their transparency wasn't visible in photographs. Maybe it took the human mind to tell the difference rather than a camera lens. I supposed it was possible no shades had attended the wedding, but given that they seemed to form an overwhelming percentage of Ovid's population, I suspected that was very unlikely.

I was so engrossed in the album I didn't hear the car pull up in the driveway or the man enter the front door. I nearly jumped when a male voice over my shoulder asked, "Looking at our wedding pictures, honey?"

"Oh!" I gasped, dropping the album on the floor as if I had been caught looking at something I shouldn't have seen. "Uh... Kenny, I didn't hear you come in."

He leaned down and kissed me on the neck. It seemed so weird to feel the short stubble against my soft skin. "You certainly made a beautiful bride."

“Uh... thank you.”

Suddenly his arms were around me, his hands against my breasts. Oh God—he had come home horny. This couldn’t be happening. I remembered again how it had been for Hannah and I back when we were newlyweds. Just like Kenny, I had often come home so horny I could hardly stand it. A younger, more agreeable Hannah had always smiled at me and practically raced me for the bedroom.

I suddenly realized unless I came up with a good excuse, I was going to end up in bed with my smooth legs spread. That wasn’t something I was ready for. I slipped out of his embrace and stood up. “Kenny, I haven’t even started dinner yet.”

He moved toward me, his arms embracing me once more as his chest pressed against my breasts. “Who needs food?”

I didn’t want to do this. It was a nightmare of gargantuan proportions. My wife was now my husband, younger, bigger, and more lusty than I could ever have imagined. I wanted to run and hide. The thought of making love as a woman with a man was the most horrifying thing I could imagine.

But what could I do? In his mind, I was his new wife. I suspected this was an act that had been repeated several times since the supposed marriage. Besides, he was bigger and stronger than me and didn’t seem likely to be deterred if I told him I wasn’t in the mood (And believe me—I really, really wasn’t in the mood). Could I feign a headache? How about saying it was my time of the month? No, neither excuse seemed likely to deter him. If I had been in his shoes—something I would have given just about anything to be—I wouldn’t have been deterred. And I certainly couldn’t tell him the truth. With his loss of memory, he wouldn’t believe me. I could scarcely believe it myself.

What could I do? As far as he was concerned—as far as most people in town real or shade were concerned—I was Kenny’s loving wife. Even if I resisted, I would eventually have to play the part I had been given. I was reasonably certain The Judge wouldn’t have it any other way. He

had changed me into a young married woman. If I didn't play the part, who knows what he might turn me into next?

Trying to hide my reluctance, I had no choice but to let him lead me into the bedroom. I hoped he didn't notice my body was trembling in fear. Even if he did, he would probably assume it was just anticipation.

Strangely enough, there was something akin to anticipation as well. It wasn't conscious. No, I had no rational desire to try out my new body with this man. But my body seemed to have a mind of its own. I suppose if I had been a woman before being transformed into a man by The Judge, I would eventually get a hard on no matter how repulsive the idea might be to me. In the same light, I could feel my nipples tingling a little and could feel something becoming warmer and damp between my legs, almost as if my body was joyfully anticipating having the void between my legs stuffed full of my man's penis even while my mind was recoiling in sheer terror.

There was nothing to do but go along with this, I realized. Some experts advise women about to be raped to do just that. After all, when a woman is being overpowered by someone much larger than she, there isn't a lot to be accomplished by fighting. Besides, given that this man thought I was his willing wife meant complications would ensue if I refused, and at the moment, I had plenty of complications in my life without adding more.

As he removed his suit, he took time to gently remove my clothing as well. His smooth motions and confident smile told me he was something of an expert at this. It was too bad, I told myself, that I hadn't been given some of the same knowledge. Of course, in Ovid the penalty for such knowledge appeared to be the loss of all memory of a previous life. Maybe that would have been better, I thought. If I had lost all memories of being a male, I wouldn't have these terrible misgivings about being drilled by a man.

Soon, we were both standing there nearly naked. Well, I was nearly naked. Kenny had just managed to take off his boxers and strip the spread off the bed, leaving me standing there in nothing but a feminine thong which I was certain would be stripped from my body

the minute I was spread out on the bed.

I remember how vulnerable I felt at that moment. The thoughts running through my mind were probably not unlike the thoughts nearly all girls have before their first time with a man. Would it hurt? How would I be able to stand having a body as big as his resting on my small form? Could this cause me to get pregnant? I found out later that there is a grace period for new women during which they don't experience periods or pregnancies, but I didn't know that then. I just hoped my new body was on the pill.

He gently guided me to the bed, watching appreciatively as I crawled to the center of the queen-sized mattress and rolled over reluctantly until I was on my back. With an expectant smile, he removed my thong and spread my legs apart.

I tried not to look at his member. As horny as he was, I suspected it was probably about the size of a rolling pin. I fully expected him to plunge directly in, splitting me in two. To my surprise, he lay down next to me, reaching with a large manly hand to the space between my legs.

Now I don't want to make it sound as if I was the sort of lover I feared Kenny would be. I suppose it was very feminine of me to assume the worst—that he would be an uncaring lover interested only in satisfying his own needs. Instead, he was very gentle and very concerned about me. I could only lie back in shock, letting him spread my nether lips and begin to work on my new clitoris. Against my worst fears, I soon found myself relaxing just a little, actually enjoying the feeling of his strong fingers sliding against my moist cleft.

It didn't take him long to get me off. I was soon gasping and shivering with pleasure. Of course, part of my mind was disgusted with what was happening, but the rest of my mind was too busy absorbing the electric thrills brought on by the orgasm.

"Now!" I gasped. It wasn't a conscious request: it was an instinctive exclamation. I know, I know—only a few short hours ago I had been male. What kind of a man suddenly finding himself in the body of a

young woman would immediately spread her legs and allow herself to be violated? It's a difficult—not to mention embarrassing—question to answer, and it was only later as I lay there in the arms of my masculinized former wife that I had the presence of mind to consider it.

As for my now-male mate, he climaxed quickly—far too quickly to get me off another time. But it felt good having him inside me, even for such a short time. If this was what sex as a woman was all about, I was suddenly not so distraught that I had given in to it so easily.

Now, as to my thoughts as I lay there with Kenny, his arm wrapped around my breasts as I used his manly chest as a pillow: I've always been a pragmatic person—male or female. I realized the moment I was led out of that courtroom that what had been done to us was forever. There would be no going back to our former lives. Although I had no idea why The Judge and Officer Mercer had done this to us, the scheme was far too elaborate to be a reversible prank. The sham of a trial, the population of shades, the mysterious town itself, and all of us who had been transformed into new people all hinted at some grand plan.

That being said, my pragmatic nature told me there was no use in resisting The Judge. In the words of the aliens in a TV show I had come to like, "Resistance is futile." The sooner I accepted my new role—including the sex—the sooner I'd be able to get on with this new life I had been given.

Did I like being a woman? Of course not. What man would want to be a woman? But I was one—like it or not. Not only was I a woman, but I was also a newlywed, young and healthy. While I might have been able to resist Kenny's advances for a short period of time, eventually I was going to have to start acting like the young bride I had become or I'd go crazy.

I had always been like that. Learning to swim, I had thrown myself off the edge of the pool one chilly June day back in New England. I was only five at the time, but I was determined not to stand nervously on the edge of the pool like all the other boys.

The same was true in my choice of a career. I was never concerned working around nuclear weapons in the military or nuclear reactors later in my civilian life. That isn't to say I was careless, but I was never frightened around nuclear facilities like some people were.

Once again, my tendency to rush into the unknown had paid off. I still would have preferred being a man, but finding that sex as a woman was pretty satisfying, I made up my mind right then that I could live with it.

It might have been different if Kenny had remembered being Hannah. I suppose if he had, we might have both approached our life as newlyweds differently and with more trepidation. I was sorry that he didn't remember. It was almost as if Hannah had died. But Kenny seemed to be a decent guy, and if I looked very hard, I could see a few of Hannah's old traits in him that had transferred over to his new male identity.

Over the next few days, I managed to settle into my new existence. Once the initial shock of being a young woman was absorbed, if not entirely accepted, things became a little easier. Since Hannah and I had shared household chores (with me taking on the lion's share as she became more and more wrapped up in her career), cooking and cleaning house were not that alien to me. To his credit, Kenny helped when he could, maybe even more than when he had been Hannah, although working in sales at a car dealer required long and unusual hours, so he wasn't always available. By the way, I learned over dinner conversation that first night that Kenny's boss was his father, who owned the dealership.

One good thing about my new life—being part of a family who owned a car dealership, I always had a new or nearly new car available which was always gassed and maintained at company expense. George, the Service Manager for Ovid Chrysler, would periodically drop off a different car for me, taking the old one back with him. Most of the time, it was just for service—an oil change, a wash, or just gas. But it was always nice to have a new car in top condition at my beck and call. I

ended up seeing George or one of his men every week, since even if I didn't trade vehicles (which was most of the time), George would make sure mine got washed and polished.

I blush as I say this, but I even got to the point that sex with Kenny seemed not only normal but downright desirable. Although in my mind I was still meant to be male, I had to admit that sex as a woman was very enjoyable. Kenny seemed to be an accomplished lover. Whether this was some residual memory of how to please a woman having been one, or just the luck of the draw, I didn't know. What I did know is that the more we did it (at least once a night), the more delightful the experience became.

I knew that should—by some additional miracle—I become male again, I would look back on the times I had spread my legs for Kenny with embarrassment. But I thought that was highly unlikely. According to Connie, no one ever got changed back. So if I was stuck as a woman, I was determined to get some enjoyment out of this body—especially since Connie told me I couldn't get pregnant for the first couple of months. However just in case, I did take birth control pills.

Connie continued to be a big help at work. Thanks to her, I managed to become reasonably proficient at my job within a couple of weeks. Even though there were far fewer people like Connie and me who remembered their real pasts than there were shades and transformees like Kenny, I ran across a few both in my professional and my personal life who helped me through my orientation.

The most helpful person in my nonprofessional life turned out to live right across the street from me. Maggie Troy was a vivacious blonde about my age (well, my new age anyhow). Her husband was a doctor—a shade, actually—who seemed to work irregular hours as well.

“Dan sees patients on Saturday mornings and tries to get home by one,” Maggie told me over coffee on my first Saturday morning in Ovid. She spotted me when we were both picking up the Saturday edition of the Tulsa World from our driveways. She had noticed that I was now real rather than a shade and had invited me over.

“Kenny sells cars,” I explained, “but I suppose you knew that.”

Maggie grinned. “Yeah, Don and Kenny have been friends ever since we moved in. So have Martha Lee and I. It always seemed to be kind of weird, socializing with three people who were shades like that.”

I took a sip of my coffee, being careful not to spill any of it on my white tank top. “Excuse me for asking, but are shades real... I mean...?” I could feel myself blushing.

“You mean can you have sex with one?” she laughed.

That was exactly what I meant. I had shaken hands with shades, and they seemed solid enough, but I wasn’t sure just how real they were. Now here I was talking to a woman who was married to one. My curiosity got the best of me.

“The answer is yes,” she said conspiratorially. “They’re just as solid as we are. I guess the sort of transparent aspect is just our mind reacting to something not quite like us. After a while, you don’t even notice they’re different. Particularly in bed.”

I blushed again.

She grinned. “Sorry, I forgot that you’re a little new at this girl stuff.”

“What?” I gasped. I hadn’t told her that I used to be male.

She laughed again. “It’s pretty obvious. Or at least it was the other day when I first saw you. You were trying to take too big a steps in heels and a skirt. You need to take shorter steps, dear.”

“Connie told me that, too,” I admitted sheepishly. It was hard to get used to walking in heels. I noticed if I just forgot about it and went with the flow, I walked more girlishly. But when I consciously thought about my new femininity, my walk reverted to a more masculine stride.

“Don’t worry,” Maggie assured me with a quick squeeze of my arm.

“We all go through it.”

“You were male, too?” It was hard for me to believe that this very girly woman in her short khaki skirt, tight white knit blouse, and her perfectly made up face who spoke so casually about sex had ever

been a man.

“Beard, bald head and all,” she confirmed. She went on to explain that she had been an Air Force civilian logistics analyst at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City. A potentially fatal accident on his motorcycle had made him a candidate for citizenship in Ovid.

“So it’s true that you have to be about to die before The Judge can change you?” I asked.

“That’s the rule,” she explained. “If it’s pretty certain you’re going to die, they lay claim to you and change you.”

So The Judge had been straight with me when he told me Hannah and I would have died crossing that bridge. I suppose given the choice of being a live woman or a dead man, I’d choose the live woman every time.

“Just who is The Judge anyhow?” I inquired as casually as I could.

Maggie shook her head. “Sorry. I can’t tell you. That’s a no-no to talk about here. Don’t worry, though. You’ll figure it out for yourself in a few days. Everybody does.”

As it turned out, she was right about that.

“Say,” Maggie said, changing the subject, “I know a couple of other girls whose husbands work Saturdays. Also, they used to be guys just like us. Maybe we should all get together for coffee every Saturday. It might be kind of like a support group.”

That had sounded like a good idea, and the next Saturday, there were four of us around Maggie’s kitchen table.

Maggie handled the introductions. I should explain in those days in Ovid, there weren’t the restrictions The Judge later placed on the town’s residents that prevented more than two people from discussing the magic of Ovid. Not that it would have mattered anyway, but more on that later.

“Before I introduce everyone,” Maggie began, “I should let all of you know that Martha Lee here is aware that all of us in the room used to

be male.”

That wouldn't have been a surprise to me even if Maggie hadn't already told me. Over lunch the previous week, Connie had explained to me that sex changes were prevalent in Ovid. This seemed to be particularly true of men becoming women—presumably because more men travelled the back roads of Oklahoma than women. Of course I had begun to think there was more to it than that. A man transformed into a woman (or vice versa) would find it terribly hard to act exactly as he had in his previous life. Having one's sex changed made it more likely that an individual would have to change to match his or her new gender or be considered a social oddity. You might even say it was socially liberating.

Once Maggie had finished introducing me, she nodded at an attractive black woman whose appearance reminded me of Vanessa Williams. Like the actress, her skin was dark but her features were Caucasian, denoting both black and white ancestry.

“Martha Lee, this is Denise Brown.”

The black woman smiled and offered her hand. I took it, noting her small, feminine hand was almost exactly the same size as mine.

“Denise's husband is Rusty Brown,” Maggie continued. When she saw the confusion on my face, she added, “I guess you haven't made it to Rusty's Burger Barn. Denise's husband owns it.”

“Best burgers in town,” Denise said with pride.

“I'll have to try them,” I assured her, although I had already noticed that my taste in food as a woman had changed, moving away from my former male fondness for meat and potatoes toward more ‘healthy’ food, like salads and veggies.

“And this,” Maggie went on, gesturing to a diminutive redhead who couldn't have been more than five two, “is Colleen Conway. Her husband is a dentist.”

Colleen's appearance matched her name—Irish to the core. Her long, lustrous red hair framed a pert face dusted with cute little freckles. She

rose from the kitchen chair to shake my hand, and as she did so, I noticed for the first time that she had a bulge in her tummy.

"I'm due in September," she explained with a wan smile.

"You're pregnant?" I gasped stupidly. Of course I knew it was possible for any of us transformed males to get pregnant. Connie had explained to me that we were all given a grace period of two or three months once we arrived in Ovid to acclimate ourselves to our new womanhood. She had warned me to be religious about taking birth control pills if I didn't want a little surprise later in the year, and I had heeded her advice.

"It happens," Colleen replied with a shrug and a charming little grin.

"You knew it was possible, didn't you?" Denise asked as she sipped her coffee.

"Yeah," I admitted, "I just... I guess I never thought... I mean... Jeez, we were all men."

"Past tense," Maggie reminded me.

"Have you had sex with your husband yet?" Colleen asked. Then she blushed. "I'm sorry—that's personal. I shouldn't have asked."

"That's okay," I assured her. "I guess we don't have much choice in that, do we?"

"There's always a choice," Denise told me. "But I know what you mean. Once we were given these bodies with all their hormones and put in homes complete with horny husbands, there doesn't seem to be a lot of choice."

"But you held off for two weeks as I recall," Maggie pointed out.

"Two weeks, three days," Denise clarified with a warm laugh. "But I had it extra bad. I was a truck driver from Fayetteville, Arkansas, and Old South white right down to my toenails. The thought of hopping in bed with a big black dude like Rusty was enough to scare the crap out of me. I tried three times to get out of Ovid before I gave up and let Rusty take me. Even then, I don't think it would have happened if he

hadn't fed me about a bottle of Merlot at Winston's."

"I only held out a week," Colleen volunteered with a fake pout.

"Ten days for me," Maggie chimed in.

"How about it, Martha Lee?" Denise asked. "Have you let ole Kenny in the door yet?"

"Uh... yeah," I admitted sheepishly, more than a little embarrassed at the direction the conversation had taken.

"How long did you wait?" Maggie asked, voicing the question I had dreaded.

"Uh... first day," I admitted, feeling my cheeks flush.

"First day!" Denise laughed. "Honey, that's gotta be a record."

"Kenny and I..." I stammered. "I mean when Kenny was Hannah, he—she—was my wife, and..."

"Well, that makes a difference," Maggie interrupted. "I guess you two were soul mates, even if Kenny didn't remember being your wife."

I supposed we were, although the months of marital strife had clouded that fact.

"And you're newlyweds," Colleen pointed out. "I mean, what would Kenny have thought if you had said no? A girl can't claim to have headaches for days on end."

"Don't worry about it," Denise added, patting my hand. "You would have given in eventually anyway. I think it has something to do with the magic. After awhile, you just start to feel natural in this form, and the sex? Well, let me tell you, honey, once I got used to Rusty, I kicked myself for waiting so long!"

I was more than a little surprised. "So everyone finally decides they like their new lives here?"

"Don't you?" Maggie asked.

That was a hard question to answer. Given the marital problems Hannah and I had been experiencing, the last few days with Kenny

had been like a return to our real newlywed days when I had been the man. Kenny was proving to be an enthusiastic lover who was, it must be admitted, far more interested in my pleasure than I had been for Hannah. I still had demurred when it came to blowjobs, but that hadn't stopped him from orally pleasuring me. And as for the blowjobs, well...

In a way, being immersed into my new life and my new sex had been far easier than I would have ever expected. Even my job was gratifying. It was sort of nice to be helping people buy their homes, and my co-workers—especially Connie—were far friendlier and much more relaxed than my co-workers at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Instead of a soulless bureaucracy I had worked in for years, my co-workers at the bank—especially Connie—seemed more like family.

"I suppose so," I admitted reluctantly.

"Would you change back if you could?" Colleen asked pointedly.

"Yeah, I would," I told them without stopping to think, shocking them just a little.

"Are you serious?" Maggie ventured.

"I can't believe you'd be willing to change back after taking Kenny on the very first day," Denise commented.

"But you just said you liked your new life here," Colleen pointed out, hopefully.

"Look," I began to explain, "I'm not saying this is a bad life. Kenny treats me well and my job is good, but don't you ever get the idea this was done to us just to satisfy the perverted pleasures of The Judge and his gang? If that's all this is, I feel like I'm being manipulated and I don't like it."

"I suppose we all have felt that," Maggie allowed, refilling our coffee cups for us. "But what can we do about it?"

"Nothing," I replied, putting a little sugar in my coffee without thinking. As a man, I had preferred my coffee straight, but now I seemed to crave a little sweetness in it. "This is just what I mean," I told them,

explaining how my taste in coffee had changed.

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Colleen agreed. “I was Jewish—Orthodox, no less. Now we attend Mass regularly, and I really, really crave bacon and ham—especially since I got pregnant.”

“Yeah,” Denise sighed. “When I was a trucker, I lived on fried foods. Now I can’t stand them—too unhealthy, I guess.”

“But you eat Rusty’s burgers,” Maggie laughed.

“Sure,” Denise grinned, “but just the small size and nothing but mustard. Oh—and a salad instead of fries.”

“So you think this is all just a big game that Jup—ack! I mean, The Judge is just playing a big game with us to see how we react to these lives?” Maggie asked.

I should mention that I didn’t know at that moment that The Judge was really the Graeco-Roman god Jupiter: that came later. But I did file Maggie’s little problem with saying his name away. It helped me understand who we were dealing with later.

“Who knows?” Denise shrugged. “Who cares? This is where we are and who we are now. We might as well make the best of it.”

“Well, we’ll have to save this discussion for another time,” Colleen said, rising. “Danny—my husband—will be getting home from the golf course pretty soon, and I always like to have lunch ready for him.”

Danny, unlike Kenny or Maggie’s husband, didn’t work Saturdays, but he and Denise’s husband apparently played golf together every Saturday morning. My God, what good little housewives we all were, I thought to myself. I was more than a little horrified. There was Colleen—formerly a man—pregnant and worried about getting home to make sure her hubby got his lunch. Was that what I’d be turning into? I had meant it when I said I’d rather be a man. Sure, the sex was fun as a woman, but the consequences—pregnancy, periods, all that disgusting stuff made it a little hard to accept. And as for leaving my friends and rushing home to fix Kenny lunch after a hard morning of golf... forget it!

At least I had a career, I thought as we all left. Apparently, Denise helped Rusty with the restaurant's books from home, and Maggie I had discovered was a part-time instructor at Capta College, but neither were full-time jobs. Colleen, on the other hand, had already quit her job as a receptionist in a dentist's office and was already settling down to be a full-time mom. Her husband, the dentist in whose office she had worked, was only open Monday through Friday, leaving his Saturday morning to desert the little woman and hit the links while she had to fend for herself. The thought of being a sweet little hausfrau while hubby went off to play wasn't a pleasant one for me.

Oh, I was already getting used to being a woman. It wasn't as if I had any choice, was it? Yes, I cooked and cleaned, but with Kenny's help. But if The Judge expected me to be a good little Stepford Wife, he was going to be disappointed. Maybe I'd start a women's lib movement in Ovid. That would frost The Judge's balls.

Maggie dropped by later that afternoon. Kenny was still at work, as was her husband, so we had plenty of time to talk.

"I've talked to the other girls," she told me after we had settled down on the patio with a glass of lemonade each. "They enjoyed this morning and think it's a good idea to meet every Saturday."

"Sure," I agreed with a wan smile. "But did you all decide I needed some serious girl lessons to fit in?" I was still embarrassed about my admission of having sex with Kenny the day I was transformed. They must have all thought I was gay.

"No!" Maggie laughed. "Don't worry: you're not saying anything different from what we all said right after we got here. Even after I gave in and had sex with Don, it took me three more weeks before I could bring myself to wear a dress. Denise told you she tried to get out of Ovid three times. And Colleen tried twice."

I just nodded. I had already tried once by that time, but I found as I drove out of Ovid and over the hill that all roads led right back to Ovid. Someone told me later that Ovid was situated in some sort of dimensional pocket universe. In any case, getting out of Ovid seemed

to be next to impossible.

“Eventually, you get used to it,” Maggie went on. “I’ve been here a little over a year now, and I find that some of my former life is becoming almost like a dream. You’ll get that way, too, eventually.”

But I didn’t want to lose the memories of my male life. I might be a woman now and even make love like a woman, but Willis Perry was still a big part of my personal identity. I hoped she was wrong, but I suspected she was right. It would be impossible to hang on to Willis too tightly when everything that happened to me now said I was Martha Lee.

She was right as it turned out. Over the summer, things settled down into a routine so normal that I sometimes found myself wondering if I ever had really been Willis Perry. There’s nothing like a good old period to make you really feel like a woman, and I had my first one in July. As strange as it felt the first time, that too, became routine quickly, repeating itself in August and September. By October, I had actually gotten used to them.

As I said, the periods drove home the point that I was now and probably forever would be a woman. I was thankful that I had taken my friends’ advice and religiously took my birth control pills. Kenny was starting to hint that if I wanted children, he was ready, but I certainly wasn’t. The idea of giving birth was more frightening to me than anything else I could ever imagine, and the periods were stinging proof that I was now not just female—but a fertile female.

This dread was not abated in the slightest when my friend Colleen finally delivered in late September. She was a couple of weeks late in delivering (not an unusual situation for a first child, I was told) and near the end looked like the Goodyear blimp. Just watching her struggle to move around at our last Saturday meeting before she gave birth was tiring.

The Monday after that gathering, she delivered a seven pound four ounce baby boy named Daniel Jonathon Conway the Third. A few weeks later, she was joining us for Saturday coffee once more, her

new baby in her arms—and at her breasts. Watching her nurse, I felt my nipples respond. It was much like the strange tingling a man gets when he sees another man kicked in the balls.

We were sitting together in my kitchen, which for some reason had become our standard meeting place. I think it was because on a whim, I had ordered some premium coffee from a little company back east, and all the girls had taken an instant liking to it. Someone must have suggested we meet at my house for the coffee, so I kept ordering it and they kept coming. I couldn't even recall when we had all agreed to do that, but it was fine with me.

"He's so cute!" Maggie squealed as Colleen expertly held him to her exposed breast where the tiny infant sucked contentedly.

"Isn't he though?" Colleen smiled with the natural pride of a new mother. "I never thought I'd be nursing a baby, though."

"You thought you'd be the father, huh?" I grinned as I poured coffee for everyone.

"Well..." she drawled, a little embarrassed, "not really. I... I was gay when I was a man."

"I didn't know that," Denise said, surprised. "Then this being a girl thing was no biggie for you."

"Au contraire," Colleen smiled. "I was homosexual—not transsexual. I was perfectly happy being male. I probably had as much trouble with finding myself female as you did. Although I'll admit giving blowjobs was a little easier."

"Ew!" Denise and Maggie exclaimed together. I kept quiet. Yes, I now gave blowjobs to Kenny, but I didn't like to think about it. I had avoided them as long as possible, but Kenny finally directly asked me to give him one—"like you used to when we were dating." It was difficult to say no—especially since he had been pleasuring me orally with no hesitation. I could have pointed out that when he gave me oral sex, there was nothing substantial to swallow, while when I did it for him, it was messy and the taste was not exactly like a vanilla milkshake.

“Girls, I have an announcement to make,” Denise said, thankfully changing the subject. “I’ve got a bun in the oven.”

“You?” Colleen gasped.

“Well I couldn’t let you have all the fun, could I?”

“Congratulations,” I replied, smiling as best I could. “When are you due?”

“Next April,” Denise told us. “I hope we can still talk about all of this like we are when I get further along.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Haven’t you heard?” Maggie countered. “The Judge has made it so only two people can discuss the magic of Ovid at once. I guess there was some trouble over at the high school that caused him to restrict our freedom of speech.”

“But that would mean we couldn’t be having this conversation right now,” I pointed out. “Maybe you heard wrong.”

“No,” Colleen broke in as she pulled back her blouse to allow her baby to nurse. “I heard the same thing. Besides, I saw it in action while I was in the hospital. For some reason, we must be immune from The Judge’s latest edict. Maybe it’s because we’ve all been here so long that we got grandfathered in.”

“I wish I were immune to some of his other actions,” I sighed.

“Poor Martha Lee,” Denise cooed with a hand petting my bare arm.

“You still don’t like being a girl?”

“It’s okay,” I allowed. “I guess I’m starting to get used to it. I would just like to stop pretending I’m someone I’m not. Besides, when my parents or Kenny’s parents come over, it still seems so weird pretending that they’re real and not shades.”

“I agree with that. I still have a hard time treating a couple of shades as my parents,” Maggie chimed in as she poured herself another cup of coffee. Then she looked down at her watch. “Oh my lord! I had no idea it was so late.”

“What time is it?” Colleen asked.

“Nearly noon,” was Maggie’s reply. That surprised me, too. It seemed as if we had just begun our conversation. The three hours had gone by very quickly, but that always seemed to be the case.

After everyone had gone, I tidied up the kitchen and noticed the florescent bulb over my stove was out. Kenny kept spares in the basement near his workbench, so I decided I’d change it myself.

‘One good thing about Kenny,’ I thought as I made my way down into the basement—Kenny’s personal sanctum really where I seldom went—‘was that he really was a good guy.’ While I was sorry that Hannah had been effectively erased when she was turned into Kenny, I had to admit that we got along far better now than we would have, had Hannah retained her memories. Hannah had become overbearing enough without giving her the strength and status of a man to lord over me.

In fact, Kenny had retained some of Hannah’s better qualities. Whether that was just part of the way The Judge had transformed her or sheer happenstance was beyond me. Still, there were times when he reminded me of the things that had initially attracted me to Hannah. Like her, he was intelligent and personable, but those aspects had not been adversely complemented with Hannah’s feminist belligerence or her quick temper. Perhaps it was his new male identity that had made him more mellow. As a man and the heir apparent to the family business, he didn’t have anything to prove as he felt he had when he had been Hannah.

And as for the way he treated me... well, let’s just say that Hannah was quickly turning into an emasculating bitch where as Kenny was a supportive and affectionate mate. Of course he had no way of knowing our sexes had been reversed, but the way he treated me had made my transition so much easier—even if he wasn’t aware of it.

As I rummaged through the basement utility cabinet in search of a new bulb, I realized that although I still would prefer being male, I knew that would never happen, and being Kenny’s wife was better

than being Hannah's husband.

I sighed. No bulbs. I looked around the basement alcove where his workbench was located, and...

What was that door doing there?

Recessed in the concrete of the foundation wall was a simple wooden door painted gray to match its surroundings. What it was doing there was completely beyond me. It seemed to have no purpose, since any room it led to would be beyond the house itself. Perhaps it was an unused storm cellar, I thought. Given the violence of tornadoes in Oklahoma, it might have been built to escape the storms.

Of course, there were no tornadoes in Ovid. The Judge and his minions would never have allowed them. It had only taken me a few days in Ovid to glean the true nature of The Judge, Officer Mercer, and the rest of the gods of the ancient world. Their identity had seemed incredible to me, but I suppose no less incredible than having one's sex changed with the wave of a hand.

So what was the purpose of the door? I would have to ask Kenny later.

I sort of forgot to ask later, though. Kenny came home with a broad smile on his face. "Dad gave me a raise," he announced proudly. "Let's go celebrate."

Now I should probably point out that at that particular moment, I had been a woman for several months, and while I had reconciled myself to a lifetime in skirts and heels, there were certain things about being a woman I had come to dislike. First on that list was obviously periods, but considering the alternative of pregnancy, I put up with them. The second thing was ultra feminine attire. In spite of what I just said about skirts and heels, I tried to wear them as little as possible, favoring jeans, shorts, and other acceptable women's casual wear when I didn't have to go to work.

And finally, I hated to cook. Even back in the days when I had been the man, I had not cared to take my turn at cooking any more than I

had to, often suggesting we eat out rather than suffer in the kitchen. Now though, while Kenny helped with a number of chores around the house, he had proved himself to be completely inept in the kitchen. The reasonably good cooking skills Hannah had were somehow lost with her memories in the transformation. I was expected to do all of the cooking now.

It was my hatred of cooking that caused me to more or less happily don the aforementioned skirt and heels with a smile on my face when Kenny suggested we celebrate at Winston's. Ovid's best restaurant had been a happy surprise in our virtual captivity in Ovid. Frankly, it was a better steakhouse than any I remembered from the DC area. Sure, the menu itself was pretty pedestrian, but the steaks were absolutely succulent. I was actually elated as I wiggled into a sexy little blue skirt and donned a pair of three-inch heels.

One thing led to another that evening. The wine was great and the steaks were absolutely magnificent, but I think it was Kenny's suggestion to enjoy a brandy after the meal that got me in a super-horny mood.

Okay, I suppose this takes some explaining. If the Sex Fairy fluttered into our home and offered to switch our sexes back to their original settings, I would have happily re-grown a penis and immediately jumped whatever woman Hannah became. However, I had learned that our bodies have needs of their own which can't always be stifled by our minds. The body The Judge had given me was young, pretty, and thoroughly addicted to sex with my husband.

Once we got home, I could barely contain myself, and Kenny knew it. In moments, we were both naked and rutting like wild animals in our bedroom. We didn't have time for much foreplay, as we had both been ready the minute we walked in the door. No—we were actually ready before the check came, but this was the first chance we had to satisfy each other.

Sex as a woman for me had become strangely liberating. It was actually nice to not have to 'get it up,' and although, in my opinion, female orgasms are not as explosively satisfying as male ones, they

do have the benefit of lasting longer and creating some mind-blowing aftershocks.

The only problem with the steamy sex that night—complete with four incredible orgasms for Kenny (a record so far) and at least six for me—was that I seemed to have forgotten something...

Something like a pill.

I've been told it's okay to skip a pill every now and then, while others have told me that just missing one can mean an unexpected addition to the family. Actually, I had missed a couple of pills. In fact, I had gotten a little careless about taking them of late. I had gotten very busy at work, and with all the pressure simply spaced them. Now, it had cost me big time.

In the weeks I had been introduced to my female body, I had realized vaguely that I was now capable of becoming pregnant. The thought was naturally alarming, but mostly theoretical—or at least it had been until I experienced my first period. After that first time, I was very careful to take my pill at the same time every day. I had no desire to get pregnant. But as I became more used to my new state, I forgot to worry about motherhood and became just a little cavalier about taking my pill. Even seeing two of my best friends succumb to motherhood hadn't been sufficient warning.

I guess girls who grow up that way get the rules drummed into their heads pretty hard: take your pill, don't let him take advantage of you, don't have sex until you're prepared for all of the consequences. I had the disadvantage of having too much of a male mind stuck in a female body. While I worried about getting pregnant, I hadn't worried about it enough to be religious about taking my birth control pills. Now it had cost me.

"Pregnant?" Maggie asked at our first Saturday coffee after I had seen the doctor.

"Does Kenny know yet?" Colleen asked.

"Oh yes," I sighed. "He and his parents are absolutely ecstatic."

“But you’re not,” Maggie guessed. It probably wasn’t too hard to figure out, though.

“Actually, I’m scared shitless,” I admitted, slumping over my coffee. If anybody but Maggie noticed, they didn’t let on.

“That just leaves you, Maggie,” Denise sang out cheerily.

“I’m in no hurry,” she sang back.

“Is it... bad?” I asked Colleen. When she looked a little confused, I clarified, “I mean the pain.”

“While you’re pregnant, it’s more uncomfortable than painful,” Colleen explained. “As for birthing... well, let’s just say that you shouldn’t let them talk you into natural childbirth. Demand all the drugs they offer to give you.”

My face must have turned pale, because she hastened to add, “Hey, don’t be scared. It really isn’t that bad.”

I can’t remember what else we talked about that morning, but at least we got off the subject of pregnancy. I think if we had continued on the subject, I would have hyperventilated. Later, I couldn’t even remember what else we had discussed. I figured I must have still been in shock.

Connie was excited when I told her Monday morning at work. “We’ve got to have a shower for you!” she squealed when she had me alone in the lunchroom.

“How come everybody is so into all of this girl stuff?” I asked her. “I mean showers, babies, weddings... Sometimes I think I’m really the only one around here who still remembers being a man.”

“We all remember,” Connie assured me. “It’s just after awhile, it isn’t important anymore. You know you’ll never be male again, so why not just learn to enjoy who you are now?”

“I don’t know,” I sighed. “I’m really not exactly unhappy. In fact, I think I was growing used to all of this being a girl—until Kenny knocked me up, that is.”

“I’ll buy you lunch,” she suggested. “We can talk about it.”

One thing I began to realize after becoming female is how women like to talk to each other about their problems—even women who used to be men. Maybe it was a good thing more men were transformed into women than the other way around in Ovid, for a woman transformed into a man would probably go crazy trying to find another man to talk over problems with. Women seemed to enjoy talking to each other about whatever was bothering them.

Most of my problems I talked over with either Maggie or Connie. They were very different as friends went. Connie was fresh out of college—at least in her new Ovid identity if not in her former male life. She was still into the dating scene, but was starting to settle down with a grad student from Capta College. If it hadn't been for the fact that they made it a point to spend every Saturday (and presumably Friday night) together, I would have invited her to our little coffee group. I usually talked to Connie about professional things but not a lot of personal stuff. We never discussed the details of our marital problems in our former lives, and since she wasn't married as Connie, we just didn't have a lot of personal information to exchange. Besides, Connie was pretty happy with her life as a girl and although she was very competent at work, she seemed to enjoy playing the ditzy young redhead with her boyfriend.

Maggie, on the other hand, was more grounded. Her background working for the Air Force in her previous life was part of it, but she told me once that she had been in her forties before she was transformed. She had been single as a man—divorced twice. Once she became a woman, she vowed to herself that this marriage was going to work no matter what. She and Dan got along great, in spite of the fact that her husband was a shade, so I would often confide in her about more personal issues—particularly the sort of issues that involved marriage, home, and... well, sex.

So this lunch with Connie was going to be a little different, because I knew she wanted to talk to me about issues Maggie and I would normally discuss. I had to keep telling myself that in spite of her youthful appearance, Connie and I were both Baby Boomers, and

when she gave me any advice, it was actually coming from a contemporary.

Neither of us had an appointment until the afternoon, so we decided on an early lunch at the *Greenhouse*. We managed to get a booth near the back of the restaurant that was isolated enough from other early lunch patrons that we could speak openly.

"You seem to be having some problems with this whole girl thing," Connie commented as soon as our iced teas had been delivered and our orders placed.

"Sometimes I like it very much," I admitted, stirring a little sugar into my tea. "But sometimes, it's just..."

"Terrifying?" Connie supplied.

"No!" Then, after a moment's thought, "Well, maybe just a little."

"Lose the man in you for a while and talk to me woman to woman," Connie suggested with a little smile.

That brought me up short. When I thought about it, I realized she was right. I wasn't a man anymore, but I was still trying to act like one. That was what was frightening me. Some part of me still considered that I was a man, and men simply didn't get pregnant. Since I was going to be a woman—and now a mother—for the rest of my life, I'd better start acting like one and confiding in my female friends.

"Okay, yeah, I'm terrified. I... The sex is, well, fun—I'll admit that."

Connie smiled again. "Aren't multiple orgasms fun?"

I nodded, blushing a little. "And I love Kenny. I mean deep down, he's still Hannah—my wife. Every now and then, I see him do something that reminds me of Hannah. And frankly, Kenny has Hannah's ambition, but it's channelled toward running a successful family business rather than climbing the bureaucratic ladder in Washington. I guess it's a lot healthier situation than we had before if you think about it."

"It sounds absolutely great to me," Connie said. "A lot of women would

be happy to trade places with you.”

“A lot of women didn’t used to be men,” I pointed out.

“True.”

We were both quiet for a moment as our lunches were delivered. I looked down at my small chef’s salad and at Connie’s sesame chicken salad. Would we have ordered lunches like this when we were men? Oh, I ate salads for lunch upon occasion—primarily when I was trying to lose a few pounds. But now, salads for lunch seemed to be the order of the day. Like all women, natural or transformed, there seemed to be a primal urge to stay slim and sexy. Besides, now that I was pregnant, I’d really have to watch my weight carefully.

“So you weren’t ready to get pregnant,” Connie stated after a few moments.

“No,” I admitted, thinking about how good a glass of wine would be right now. But of course, that was out of the question—it wouldn’t be good for the baby, would it?

“I think it’s exciting,” Connie announced.

I nearly dropped my fork. “Exciting? More like horrifying.”

She laughed, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand. “Just think, Martha Lee. You’ve got a brand new person growing inside you. You’re doing something the strongest, smartest, most powerful man on the planet could never do, no matter how hard he tried.”

“It sounds like you should be pregnant instead of me.”

“That time may not be very far away,” she grinned, holding up her hand so I could see her new engagement ring. “Greg finally proposed.”

I smiled weakly. I hadn’t even noticed her ring, and I was sure now that she had been flashing it at me all morning hoping I would notice.

“Congratulations,” I managed.

“Would you be my matron of honor?”

That hit me like a bolt out of the blue. “But... I’m pregnant.”

“So?”

I think I stammered out a few semi-objections, but Connie would have none of it. “Don’t worry. This isn’t going to be a big affair. Vera March is going to make sure the dresses get here quickly.”

She didn’t have to explain about that. Everyone knew Vera March was a goddess. If Vera said the dresses would be in quickly, then they would be.

“Neither of us have families nearby—real or contrived. Since all of our friends are here, we thought we’d have the wedding just before Thanksgiving.”

“Why are you so happy about all of this?” I finally asked.

“About what?”

“About being a girl... and getting married... and me being pregnant,” I listed off.

Connie looked pensive for a moment before replying. “Martha Lee, back when you were a man, did you enjoy your job?”

“It was okay,” I replied carefully.

“Did you love your wife?”

“Sure.” That was said with a little more conviction, but there were some reservations in my voice. Connie picked up on them with ease.

“Where were you going to be with both of them in five more years?”

I laughed uncomfortably. “If you take The Judge at his word, it wouldn’t have mattered since both Hannah and I would have been dead.”

“But let’s assume you had both lived,” she pressed on. “Where would you be?”

Over the weeks and months I had been a woman, Connie and I hadn’t discussed a lot about our former lives, but at least a few facts had been exchanged, perhaps more than I had realized. I had told Connie

more than I probably should have about my marital problems and my frustrations at work. Now, she had me. I couldn't stonewall her this time.

"Okay," I admitted. "Hannah and I were having problems. She wanted a career—not a family. We were already getting on each other's nerves, so I suspect we would have ended up splitting the sheets. But I would have still had my own career."

"A career I sense you weren't all that excited about," she countered. "Didn't you tell me rather than protecting the public, you often felt you were just shuffling paper?"

"Every bureaucrat feels that way sometimes," I replied smoothly if not completely convincingly. "You should know—you worked for the government, too—at least a state government."

"Yes I did," she agreed. "The difference is that I didn't have a family. My wife left me several years ago, and working in the field I was in doesn't give you much of an opportunity to meet potential mates. Martha Lee, I was bored stiff with my life."

Suddenly, Connie clammed up again. This time, I could see she was struggling as to whether or not to tell me something. At last, making her decision, she asked, "Martha Lee, do you remember when I told you I was due to die in a hunting accident?"

"Yes?"

She looked down at the table, unable to look me in the eye for a moment. At last, gathering her courage, she looked up at me. "It wasn't going to be an accident. I went out there in the woods to kill myself."

"Kill yourself?" I gasped.

She nodded. "My marriage was finished. There were no children: I hadn't wanted any... then. My job was boring and I was feeling very, very trapped. It didn't seem as if I had anything to live for—no family, no real close friends, no fun at work... Does any of this sound familiar?"

‘Too familiar,’ I thought to myself, but I said nothing.

Without waiting for my reply, Connie continued, “I got arrested by Officer Mercer for hunting without a license. He dragged me back before The Judge, and the next thing I knew, I was Connie Delany.

“It was weird at first, but you know that. There were even less of us then though—transformees, I mean. So I had to teach myself how to be a girl—how to dress, how to act, how to apply makeup. Believe me, I used the automatic mode a lot.

“After a couple of weeks, being Connie started to seem sort of normal. It was kind of nice to have friends. Apparently the shade Connie was a popular girl, just out of college with a new job and lots of friends. Pretty soon, I found there were plenty of things to do around here—events at the college, nice little restaurants, even a beach out at the lake—and there were plenty of friends to enjoy it all with.

“And then I met Greg...”

She smiled when she saw the look in my eyes. I had assumed she had been saddled with Greg from the moment she was changed into a girl. “You mean you started seeing Greg voluntarily?” I blurted out.

“That’s right,” she confirmed. “I know: it was different for you. When you were changed, you already had a husband. You had to act the part of a girl sexually or there would have been complications. I didn’t have to—but I wanted to!”

“You wanted to be... intimate with a man?”

“I haven’t found any lesbians around here,” she drawled, “and I don’t think I’d like to be one anyhow. When we all got changed, we got changed all the way—physically and mentally.” As I tried to think of something to say, she pressed on, “Are you going to tell me you don’t enjoy sex with Kenny?”

“It’s... okay.”

“Martha Lee, quit trying to fool yourself. You’re a woman, and you’re going to be one for the rest of your life. Don’t you understand that? Learn to enjoy it. No one here in Ovid will think any the less of you for

it.”

I started to feel a little choked up as I realized she was right. I had been fooling myself—or at least trying to. It was funny. It wasn’t as if I had been some sort of a macho jerk who thought women were an inferior species. It was just that I had spent a lot of years thinking of myself as a man and it was hard to give up on that idea. If I had found myself married to anyone other than Kenny, who I still considered to be Hannah at some unexplainable level, I would have found it difficult to even pretend to accept the role I had been given.

I suppose that luncheon with Connie was something of an epiphany for me. For the first time in the months that I had spent in Ovid, I realized with certainty that I wasn’t just acting like a woman—I was a woman, from the ends of my long, feminine hairdo to the tips of my little pink-painted toenails.

And the strange thing is that for the first time since my transformation, I felt comfortable with it.

So from then on, my life became more normal and decidedly mundane. At times, I could almost forget what it had ever been like to be a man, especially when I was lying on my back in bed as Kenny made slow, satisfying love to me.

As Connie had predicted, I still wasn’t showing on the date of her wedding, and I actually flushed at the compliments I received for being such a beautiful matron of honor. I found my reactions increasingly more feminine, and I honestly didn’t mind.

With so much to think about—my pregnancy and my newfound acceptance of my new sex, I sort of forgot about the locked door in the basement. Oh, every now and then I would go down to Kenny’s private domain, consisting of enough power tools and a work area that would have been the envy of both a professional carpenter and a professional machinist, just to get a hammer to hang a picture or something equally innocuous, but for the most part, I stayed out of the basement. Even when I did remember about the door, something—such as a not-so-gentle kick from my developing baby—would cause

me to forget about it.

Our Saturday coffees continued, but all of us spoke less and less about our former lives and began to discuss things so bland that I couldn't even remember most of our conversations. I supposed we talked about babies and being pregnant and our husbands and the latest fashions available at March's Department Store, but I really was unable to remember any of the conversations in detail.

Everyone told me how lucky I was to have most of my pregnancy over the cooler winter months. Maybe so, but I certainly didn't feel lucky. Instead, I felt like a huge fat cow through most of the spring. I was determined to make little Rachel Jean (Yes, we knew it was a girl) an only child, just so I would never have to experience anything as uncomfortable and degrading as being pregnant again.

Yes, I know. Many natural women feel the same way, and eventually, they get over it and want to do it again. I couldn't say for certain that I wouldn't be just like them, but the diminishing male portion of my brain made a strong case for never getting knocked up again.

I was so busy over the winter months that I didn't have a moment for a spare thought. Things as inconsequential as the unexplained door in the basement didn't even show up on my radar, what with visits from both my family and Kenny's family over the holidays and the extra work I had to take on at the bank while Connie and her new husband were on their honeymoon.

Of course, my family didn't really come in from out of town—or at least so I was told. Common belief among the transformed of Ovid was that our out-of-town families came into existence just to visit us. Shades served that purpose, but after awhile, one gets used to them and thinks of them as just normal people. I could even call "Mom" and talk to her any time I wanted to, and if I concentrated hard enough on my mother, father and sister while they were with us from their 'home' in Muskogee, they seemed real to me, their transparency becoming almost indiscernible.

Kenny's parents were around for much of the holiday period as well,

and while Kenny's father was still a shade, his mother became real. She had been a very elderly woman, so becoming middle-aged was no hardship for her. Saying that, obviously she remembered who she had been, and we quickly became good friends. She was even there at my side in the spring when little Rachel Jean was born.

Weeks became months and months became years. After Rachel was weaned, I had almost forgotten what it had been like to be male, so taken by motherhood as I was. And like other women before me, I quickly forgot the pain and discomfort of childbirth, getting pregnant again when Rachel turned three. So much for having an only child.

My little Saturday coffee klatch had become sacrosanct, each of my neighborhood friends still participating in the weekly ritual, in spite of the fact that among us, we now had seven children with the eighth one (my little boy-to-be) on the way. He was due a couple of weeks after Labor Day (How appropriate!) Of course, I had had to endure a summer pregnancy, so now I knew what the others had meant when they told me how lucky I was to be pregnant with Rachel over the winter.

Life was as pleasant as pleasant could be. Kenny was now pretty much running Ovid Chrysler as his parents—now both real (although his father was one of the ones who had lost any memory of a previous life) preferred to travel and enjoy a life with fewer responsibilities. I stayed busy as well, volunteering for a couple of charities and even helping on a couple of committees at our church.

Then, suddenly and without any warning, the shit hit the fan.

"Did you hear what happened last week?" Maggie asked, suddenly losing her train of thought as either Gary or Larry screeched when Rachel yanked a ball out of his hand. I think it was Gary, but I couldn't be sure. Maggie's twins were absolutely identical. Maggie had been the last of us to give birth, but she did it with a vengeance, producing two very active twin boys.

"Rachel, give him back the ball!" I called, turning back to Maggie. "No,

what happened?”

“We got invaded!” Maggie exclaimed. “The Navy sent in a Seal Team.”

“The government knows about Ovid?” Denise asked as she placed some of her wonderful homemade pastries on a plate.

“I heard from Danny there were at least twenty of them,” Colleen chimed in.

“More like ten, according to what I heard,” Maggie replied. “Of course, most people in town think it was just some sort of a training exercise.”

“What did The Judge do with them?” I asked, grabbing one of the pastries. It seemed like this time while I was pregnant, I just couldn’t get enough to eat. I’d be lucky if I ever fitted back into my regular clothes again.

“I don’t know for sure,” Maggie admitted. “I heard at least one of them was turned into a little girl.”

“Maybe they all were,” I suggested, actually hoping that was the case. I had known a number of Seals during my government career. More than once, they had provided information on foreign nuclear sites. While I had to admire their professional talents, I was always a little put off by their macho attitudes. I’m sure if I were to meet one after my transformation, I’d be even more put off. The thought of an entire Seal Team turned into little girls in pink dresses and white shoes was an evilly delicious vision.

“We’ll find out eventually,” Debbie chuckled. “After all, Ovid is a small town.”

Yes it was, but it was getting larger and more prosperous. Vulman Industries had gone on a hiring binge, bringing in new families every week. Some of them were not even transformees. I suspected even these unchanged residents were somehow mentally adapted to Ovid. Otherwise, why would they possibly move to a town that wasn’t even on the map? Most of them seemed to be scientists and engineers, leading all of us to suspect that Vulman was doing something besides

providing mundane parts for the auto industry as their local literature declared.

I can't remember what else we discussed that morning, but I do remember vividly what happened afterward. Kenny came home early, just as we were all gathering up our children and saying our goodbyes. When I asked him why, he grinned and replied, "Dad has decided to retire completely. He and mom are going to travel more and play a lot of golf. You're looking at the new general manager of Ovid Chrysler."

"Oh honey, I'm so happy for you," I said, hugging him joyfully. This was what Kenny had been working for. Of course, we knew his father would turn over the business to him eventually, but we had figured it would be at least five more years before he let go of the reins completely. As I've said, Kenny was like Hannah in that he was very ambitious. Apparently he had done better than his father had imagined he would, and his parents had decided to kick back in retirement.

All the girls congratulated us and headed home. When it was just Kenny, Rachel and me, I decided, "We should all celebrate."

Kenny smiled, "It's already been taken care of. We have a seven o'clock reservation at Winston's—a reservation for two, by the way. My folks are taking Rachel for the night. We can pick her up after church tomorrow."

There was nothing male about the thoughts that suddenly ran through my mind. I had moved beyond all of that. Motherhood had instinctively taken its toll on the remaining portion of my male sense of identity. Now, my thoughts were that it was a shame I was so far along in my pregnancy that Kenny and I couldn't take advantage of our rare evening without a child to slow us down. I'd simply have to give him the very best blowjob of his life and be satisfied with oral stimulation from him. That thought alone would have sent me over the edge a few years earlier. Now, I looked forward to it.

The other highly feminine thought that came to the surface was that I didn't have much of a choice of anything to wear to Winston's. This

was a special night, and I wanted to look special. That wouldn't be easy in my condition. Still, Vera March had found something for me two months earlier—a simple black maternity dress that managed to be both modest and sexy at the same time. I had worn it to Winston's before, but Ovid wasn't like Washington, where Hannah would have rather died than wear the same dress to two parties in a row.

I was getting ready to go that evening while Kenny, already dressed in the navy blue suit that made him look so dapper, took Rachel over to his parents' house. The dress, as hoped, still fit well, and I was just finishing off my outfit by slipping into a pair of black heels I had gotten to go with the dress. The heels were slim and sexy, but the shoe was a little wider than I usually wore—a concession to my gravid body which had spread my feet out a bit.

As I was slipping the shoes on, the left one felt odd, the heel suddenly shifting, nearly causing me to fall over. I grabbed onto the doorsill, barely avoiding a painful fall, but one look down told me the heel had nearly broken off.

I stepped out of the other shoe, and with difficulty, managed to pick up the damaged one. The heel had just been tacked into the sole of the shoe, and the tiny nails remained unbent. That was good, for it meant the shoe could be repaired well enough to be worn just that one evening. That was a relief, because they were the only shoes I could still wear with my dress that looked good. What a woman I had become!

Since Kenny wasn't back yet, I decided to fix the shoe myself. After all, as a man, I was certainly familiar with how to wield a hammer. And it wasn't as if I would have to pound a three inch nail into a two by four. A few gentle taps and the heel would be as good as new—at least until I could get the shoes in for a more substantial repair. Besides, in another month, my body would slowly start to return to normal, and my other shoes would fit properly once more. I'd probably end up giving this pair away.

I was so intent on fixing the shoe that I didn't notice anything else in the basement. Then, after the tiny nails had been tapped back into

place, I saw something I hadn't expected. At first, my mind didn't process what I was seeing—only that something was different. Then I realized what it was: the mysterious door was slightly open.

I looked at my watch. I still had plenty of time to get ready, and the opportunity to look beyond the door obviously didn't come often. I had to see what was inside. It wasn't that I was expecting to find the room filled to the ceiling with hidden treasure. I was just curious what the room was for and thought that there might be something in there to tell me why someone had gone to all the trouble of building it in the first place.

The room was dark and had a little musty smell. As I fumbled for a light switch I hoped was there, I thought that what I would find would probably be mouldy scraps of wood or old broken-down appliances or something equally mundane. Maybe the room was built as a bomb shelter—a relic left over from Cold War paranoia. When I found the light switch and illuminated the room in unexpectedly bright fluorescent lights, I gasped at the realization of how wrong I had been—and how right I had been, for it was, indeed, a relic of the Cold War after a fashion.

There, sitting on a stainless steel table, was a device I was intimately familiar with:

An atomic bomb.

Contrary to what a layman might have expected, the device on the table looked nothing like the common conception of an atomic bomb. For one thing, it lacked a casing. After all, the outer skin of most atomic bombs was designed along with its fins to make it sail through the air to its target. This bomb was not designed to go off after being dropped from a plane. With nothing but the house above in its way, it could be exploded right on the table and take out all of Ovid with destructive energy to spare. Add to that the unique nature of Ovid, which seemed to wrap around itself in some sort of dimensional pocket, and it was likely the bomb would do far more damage than it would in a conventional landscape where the force of the explosion was allowed to dissipate.

Carefully, I inched toward the bomb, my trembling hand reaching out to the exposed cylinders where fissionable material would be stored in two sub-critical masses ready to be slammed together to form an atomic explosion. I didn't fear radiation from the bomb. If there was any leakage, I (and my unborn child) had already been exposed to a potentially lethal dose. To my relief, an examination of the cylinders showed them to be empty. The bomb was inert, with no fissionable material in evidence.

In spite of that, the bomb was nearly complete. I estimated that only the radioactive core needed to be added to make it a lethal weapon. And there it was, sitting in my own basement.

I began to think about how Kenny would disappear in the basement every now and then. He liked to work with his hands—ironic since when our sexes had been reversed, Hannah barely knew which end of a hammer to use when hitting a nail. Kenny's little work area was a credible machine shop if used right. I knew that because I was very familiar with every piece of equipment he owned.

But how had he built the rudimentary weapon right under my nose? Hadn't he lost all of his previous memories? Surely The Judge hadn't given him the knowledge and the skills to build a formidable weapon. After all, The Judge was a god: surely gods had no use for atomic weapons.

Then I remembered conversations we used to have when I was with the NRC. There had been a real fear back in the days before the fall of the Soviet Union that nuclear bombs could be smuggled into our cities in suitcases. The old joke went that the Soviets could probably build enough bombs, but did they have enough suitcases?

This was no laughing matter, though. It matched current concerns about Moslem terrorists being able to build a bomb and set it off from a fixed location with no delivery system required. The agents who built the bomb would be trusted citizens called into action after being dormant for many years. They were called sleepers.

It was hard to imagine Kenny as a sleeper... or was it? When Kenny

was Hannah, she had worked for none other than the Ice Queen herself. Now, Freda Jorgenson was one of the most powerful women in our government. Could Jorgenson have known all about Ovid and arranged for Hannah and me to be stranded here, hiding the fact that my former wife actually remembered everything of her previous life? Had Kenny been fooling The Judge and, by extension, me for the past four years?

I was shocked out of my thoughts by the front door slamming. Oh shit! Kenny was home! Flustered, I shut the door to the hidden room, hoping he wouldn't notice anything amiss. Then, collecting myself with a deep breath, I made my way up the stairs.

"Oh, there you are," he said smoothly when he saw me come out of the basement. "What were you doing in the basement?"

He sounded so casual. Had he forgotten that he had left the door to the secret room open? I had to act nonchalant and assume that to be the case. I held up my repaired shoe. "I had a heel come loose. I just went downstairs to pound it back into place."

"Here, let's see," he said, snatching the shoe out of my hand and inspecting the heel, trying to move it with his hand. Did he suspect that I was lying? I wasn't entirely lying, of course: I had actually fixed the shoe. "It looks like you did a pretty good job," he commented, examining the shoe from various angles. "You should have let me work on it, though. You shouldn't be climbing a lot of stairs in your condition."

"I suppose you're right," I responded with a nervous smile. "Just give me a few more minutes to get ready."

Dinner at Winston's should have been a fun experience, I thought as I fussed with my steak. Since I had been pregnant, I had been ravenous, but that night, after my discovery in the basement, I could barely eat my food. Kenny noticed it, too.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"What? Oh, yes, yes I'm fine," I lied. "It's just that the baby is kicking a

little.”

Actually, the baby was kicking quite a bit, but that normally didn't detract from my appetite of late. 'Quiet, Junior,' I thought to myself, and to my surprise, the kicking let up. Just a coincidence, I told myself.

He eyed me with concern. “Do you want to leave?”

“No!” I replied quickly. I wasn't anxious to go home again—not to a home where the downstairs house guest was a nearly-completed nuclear weapon. “I'll be fine.”

Kenny looked at me sceptically, but eventually settled down to finish his steak. I wished, and not for the first time that evening, that I could drink wine. Alcohol might have dulled the pain of betrayal I felt over Kenny's basement activities.

I put on a brave front for the rest of the evening. I even worked up enough courage to give Kenny the blowjob I knew he had been anticipating all day. He reciprocated, of course, but I didn't get off, to both of our disappointments. I was just too upset about the bomb.

As I lay there in bed, trying to get to sleep, I tried to think of what to do about my discovery. In the months and years since our transformations, I had come to love Kenny as much as I had loved Hannah in our previous lives. Unlike my tumultuous marriage with Hannah, our new lives together had gone much more smoothly. In spite of this, my mind told me I needed to go to The Judge and tell him that somehow, Kenny wasn't what he seemed—that he was building a device destructive enough to destroy all of Ovid.

But I loved him. Damn it all and damn me, I still loved him, in spite of what he was doing. How could I betray him?

I suddenly had compassion for women throughout history who fell into the trap of loving men who, while tender to them, were a danger to all around them. For Hitler, there was Eva. For Al Capone, there was... I don't know—Mrs. Capone. For Kenny, there was me.

I cried myself to sleep that night.

The next morning wasn't much better. When I got up, I looked over at

Kenny, still snoring peacefully. How could he sleep so soundly, knowing what he was doing in our own house? How could he possibly do this to us?

Then it hit me—Freda Jorgenson. While not officially acknowledged, it was pretty certain that the Ice Queen was responsible for much of what passed for homeland security. It was possible that she and her associates knew all about Ovid and the actions of the gods. If that were so, could she have convinced the government that Ovid posed a danger to the nation—a danger large enough to warrant its extermination?

I couldn't imagine any motive that Kenny could possibly have that would cause him to build anything so lethal though, even if the government demanded it. Kenny simply wasn't the sort of person who could exterminate an entire community. Hannah might have, I thought ungraciously, but not Kenny. What hold did Freda Jorgenson have over him? For I knew in my heart (woman's intuition?) that she was somehow implicated in this. Where else could he be getting the parts? Given her position, she could have easily supplied him so long as she knew that Ovid existed. Getting something into Ovid wasn't difficult at all. Getting something out was the problem.

For that matter, how had he managed to build it? Oh, the parts were no problem. For the more technical components, there was Freda. With the small machine shop he had in the basement, any competent engineer could have made the other parts. Given that the bomb didn't have to be transported or dropped, it didn't have to be particularly elegant. The only really hard part about building a bomb is procuring the explosive materials to detonate it. Thankfully, that part was missing. What I meant was where had Kenny developed the expertise to build the bomb?

Of course, I could have been completely wrong about any involvement from Freda Jorgenson. Still, it made sense. She was high up in NSA now, and Hannah had worked for her—practically worshiped her. If anyone would have commanded Kenny's loyalty and had access to whatever was needed to build an atomic bomb, it was Freda.

And that brought up another question. It was obvious our government knew about Ovid. How else could the Seal incursion be explained? But the question is why would the US government entertain setting off a nuclear device on US soil—especially so close to populated areas even in the name of national security? Ovid might be sitting in some sort of pocket universe, but it was obviously somehow tied to the outside world as well. I estimated that even a fairly small bomb could be nearly as catastrophic to the surrounding area as the meltdown of a medium-sized reactor.

And what would it take to trigger a nuclear explosion, I wondered? Well, several pounds of fissionable material for starters. Then, the non-nuclear trigger would have to be positioned—not a job for amateurs certainly. Even if everything was done as crudely as possible, the explosive package and its casing would not be light—perhaps eighty to a hundred pounds, given the crude design. I began to breathe a little easier. I would certainly notice if Kenny came home lugging a hundred pound package. And it wasn't the sort of thing you could hide in your briefcase.

But even if that were the case, how could Kenny have forgotten his life as Hannah and still performed a sleeper mission like building a bomb?

I stood there momentarily paralyzed in the shower as I realized the answer to my question: Kenny still had all of Hannah's memories.

Tears now mixed with the soothing water of the shower as I realized what a fool I had been. Hannah—as Kenny—had been toying with me over the years, pretending that he had no memories of his feminine past while he watched me play the role that had once been his.

I looked down at my protruding belly. Now I was carrying his child—his second child, no less. What was to become of us? Did Kenny plan to get us out of Ovid somehow before destroying the town that had been our home? Or were we supposed to be obliterated in the nuclear explosion, unsuspectingly going about our daily lives until Kenny pushed the button.

I couldn't allow that to happen. Kenny had to be stopped before the

bomb was any further along.

As my tears dried, I towed myself off and began to formulate a plan. The Judge would have to be informed, of course. While love for Kenny had prevented me from going to The Judge already, that love was undoubtedly a sham. I had to tell The Judge. I could do that at church that very morning. I had seen The Judge frequently at services at First Baptist where our family attended. I would pull him aside and tell him about the bomb.

I tried to act normal as we ate breakfast and prepared to leave for church. Kenny was surprised that I didn't want to sleep in, but he dutifully got ready for church without any apparent suspicions.

The service seemed to go on forever, but I think that was just because I was so anxious to see The Judge. He was seated next to Mark and Vera March, which made sense, I suppose, since according to most myths, they were family. I watched him as the service went on, wondering why he even bothered to attend church. After all, wasn't he supposed to be a deity in his own right? How did that reconcile with his attendance at a Christian church?

Whatever the reason, I was glad he was there. Otherwise, I would have had to wait until Monday to try to catch him before he held court since to my knowledge, none of the gods had houses in Ovid. I didn't want to wait any longer. Eventually, Kenny would detect something wrong in my mood. I couldn't let him suspect that I knew he had retained his memories.

He was a good actor: I'll give him that. He never said or did anything which would have made me suspect he had retained his old memories. I even began to have doubts about my conclusion regarding that. But how else could the bomb in the basement be explained? Rachel was too young to build it, and I certainly didn't recall building a nuclear weapon in between changing diapers and fixing dinner.

"Good sermon," Kenny commented as Reverend Wallace marched down the aisle as we sang the recessional.

“Yes, it was,” I agreed, although I honestly couldn’t remember a word of it.

Kenny waved at his father and mother, sitting across the church with Rachel between them. “Oh, Mom wants us to join them for dinner. I forgot to mention it to you. Let’s go talk to them.”

“Sure,” I agreed, not really concentrating on what he was saying. “There’s someone I have to see first.” Before Kenny could reply, I let go of his hand and pushed my way through the crowd toward where I had last seen The Judge.

While The Judge seemed eight feet tall when facing him in a courtroom, his stature was really not a great deal more than average. I doubted if he topped six feet. Unfortunately, there were many men taller than he, making it very difficult for me to keep an eye on his movements. Add to that the large crowd milling in the narthex and I was afraid I was going to lose him.

Then I spotted Mark March and caught a glimpse of Vera March’s magnificent golden hair. The Judge was with them, just going through an exit. I dove for the nearest exit, sure now that I’d be able to catch his eye out on the more thinly crowded steps.

But I was wrong. When I stepped out of the church into the warm summer morning, there was no sign of The Judge or Mark and Vera March. “Where did they go?” I asked myself out loud.

“Who?”

I looked around to see Trisha Yamamoto standing there, her pale yellow dress complementing her smooth Asian complexion. There weren’t many Asian families in Ovid, and Trisha’s family was the only one I knew who attended our church. From what I knew of her, Trisha was a very promising student, just getting ready for her final year of high school. I had known her since last year when her family had moved into a bigger house out toward Vulman Industries.

“Oh...” I stammered, “just... uh... The Judge.”

She giggled, “I’ve noticed he doesn’t leave church like we poor

mortals.”

So Trisha was one of us who remembered who she had been. I hadn’t known that.

“So he doesn’t... uh...” I didn’t know how to phrase it.

“No, he doesn’t,” she replied, pushing a strand of lustrous black hair away from her beautiful face. “I’ve noticed it before. When he leaves church he just sort of disappears. All of... them do.”

“I’ve got to talk to him,” I told her. “Where does he go when he’s not... here?”

Trisha just shrugged. “Nobody seems to know. If anybody did, it would be Cindy Patton. I think I saw her inside.”

“Thanks. Trisha!” I turned and rushed back into the church—or rushed as much as any woman a couple of weeks away from delivering a baby can.

Cindy was chatting with Susan Jager, a local attorney who I understood took on a lot of the cases of newcomers to Ovid. I had met her on a couple of real estate closings where the borrower had insisted upon having an attorney present. I had come to like Susan and respect her as an attorney. I couldn’t help but wonder if she would have been able to talk The Judge into handling my case better. Maybe if she’d been my attorney, I’d still be male and not the pregnant wife of a sleeper agent intent upon blowing up Ovid.

I had known Cindy practically since she arrived in Ovid. In addition to going to church and serving on a church committee together, Rachel attended the same day-care as Cindy’s youngest, so we had talked while waiting to pick up our kids. Kenny and Jerry—Cindy’s husband—had worked together on some Chamber of Commerce projects, and the four of us often sat together at Chamber dinners and other functions. While Cindy was certainly not among my closest friends, we knew each other well enough that I felt I could confide a little in her.

“Cindy, can we talk for a moment?”

She must have seen the worry written on my face, for she turned

quickly and told Susan, "I'll see you later today and we can take care of that."

Susan nodded, her expression equally serious. "Nice to see you, Martha Lee."

"You too, Susan."

I shot a glance over my shoulder, just to make sure Kenny wasn't watching me. I didn't see him, and hoped he was still inside the church with his parents. It wouldn't do for him to see me talking with Cindy: he might get suspicious.

"Cindy, I have to see The Judge—right away!" I pleaded as soon as I had her full attention.

"Martha Lee," Cindy began slowly, "I'm sure he'll be willing to see you tomorrow..."

"No! Not tomorrow," I protested. "You know more about him than anyone else in Ovid. You can find him wherever he is. Tell him it's urgent."

Cindy put a comforting hand on my arm. "Martha Lee, I'd get him for you if I could. I'm just his assistant, though. He doesn't tell me where he goes most of the time. Is it a problem Susan or I can help you with?"

I didn't want to panic Cindy by telling her about the bomb. If I had thought for a moment that she was lying about being able to reach The Judge, I might have told her, but I was sure she was telling the truth. Cindy was like me and so many others. She was one of The Judge's subjects—not a god. But I had to give it one more try.

"Isn't there some way you can reach him?" I insisted. "I mean, surely an emergency would bring him back. What if there was a danger to all of Ovid?"

"Martha, I don't know what has you so worried, but I can tell you this: The Judge has set up a pretty elaborate defense around Ovid. If anything tried to endanger Ovid, he'd know about it," Cindy assured me. "I can make sure you get in to see him before court tomorrow, but

that's the best I can do."

It figured the gods would be so smug that they would believe only they could detect any true danger to Ovid. I was certain that if a plane were to drop an atomic bomb on Ovid, the response would be swift and decisive. But apparently they never anticipated that one of their 'citizens' could fool them. They never for a moment believed it was possible to smuggle a dangerous weapon into Ovid and assemble it one piece at a time. This was hubris on an incredible scale. And why not? Hubris was after all, a Greek word for excessive pride. It stood to reason that gods who originated in Greece would fall prey to it.

"Cindy," I said softly, "are you sure it's the best you can do?"

"It is."

"Then I'll be in The Judge's office at... what... eight?"

"Eight thirty," Cindy corrected.

I nodded and headed back to find my family. I supposed it would be safe to wait until tomorrow. After all, Kenny would be with me at his parents' house most of the afternoon. I'd help his mother cook dinner while Kenny and his father watched a football game on TV. The earliest he would be able to work on the bomb would be evening, and if I had to, I could keep him occupied during that time.

Besides, it wasn't as if the core of the bomb was just sitting around the house somewhere—was it? I didn't think so. Judging by the size of the assembly where the core had to be cradled, it was a fairly large item. Monday morning would be plenty of time to warn The Judge. I just hoped that I could hide my fear from Kenny for another evening.

It was time to face him. I took a deep breath and forced a brave smile as I turned to rejoin my family. I wanted to run away and hide somewhere until I could see The Judge Monday morning. I could always stay with Connie...

No, I couldn't. Kenny mustn't suspect a thing, I realized. If he thought for a moment that I knew what he was up to, I couldn't imagine what he would do to me. Anyone capable of vaporizing thousands of

people—people he had come to know as friends and family over our years in Ovid—would be able to snuff me out without a second thought. So I forced myself to move as if nothing was going on back to where Kenny stood talking with his parents.

I had been fortunate in drawing the in-laws I had, I reflected as I forced a smile toward Kenny and his parents. Jude and Larissa Hamilton were far nicer than Hannah's parents had been to me. Hannah's parents had constantly interfered in our marriage. From their lofty perch in Philadelphia society, they had ceaselessly pushed Hannah in her quest to succeed while they scoffed at me, a lowly mid-level bureaucrat who was obviously not fit to marry their talented daughter.

The Hamiltons, on the other hand, let us live our own lives, content to be doting grandparents and helpful relatives. Larissa was always very friendly, but never forced herself upon me. Jude mentored his son, helping him to become the businessman he had once been. Together, Kenny's parents had a warm, loving relationship they planned to carry right on into retirement, where they would probably spend the winter months in a warmer clime, returning to their home in Ovid often to enjoy the company of their only child and his family.

Of course, it was all fiction.

Kenny's parents were shades, albeit very nice shades. I fully expected that when they travelled, they would simply fade from their temporary Ovid existence, coming back only when needed to complete their roles. It was possible that I was wrong. Perhaps shades really did have a life outside of Ovid. It was possible that once out of Ovid, they appeared as normal people to anyone who saw them. If anyone knew the true nature of shades, they hadn't conveyed it to me. It was one of those mysteries of Ovid I'd probably never solve.

"We were about ready to come looking for you, Martha Lee," Larissa called out, releasing Rachel's little hand so she could run to me.

"Sorry," I apologized as I lifted my daughter into my arms. "I was talking with Susan Jager about some matters at work." Well, I had

talked to her for just a moment, so it wasn't completely a lie.

"She's a fine attorney, don't you think so Kenny?" Jude commented.

"Absolutely," my husband replied. Was it my imagination, or was he looking at me suspiciously? No, it had to be just my imagination. 'Calm down Martha Lee,' I told myself, or Kenny will know something is going on.

"We've even started using her as our personal attorney," Larissa added brightly. "She seems so much more caring than Henry Wilcox anyway."

"Now let's be fair Larry," Jude chuckled, using his pet name for Larissa, "Henry is much too busy working for the college to do much outside work anyway. He just did our legal work because he was a personal friend. He even recommended Susan to us. And yes, Susan is a sweet young woman."

I thought about the way everyone did business back in Washington. It seemed that no one could make a move without a room full of lawyers looking over their shoulders, each charging at least half a thou an hour. Now here was Jude, a successful businessman by all accounts, whose need for a lawyer was so small that he had depended upon an old friend—golfing buddy actually—for his small legal needs. I wondered what he would think if he knew that his new attorney, who he thought was 'sweet', had been one of the top criminal lawyers in the country before her transformation.

"Well let's get over to the house," Jude urged, looking down at his watch. "We've got the early game today."

"You seem kind of distant today," Kenny remarked as we drove the short distance to his parents' house.

'Of course I'm distant, you idiot! You've been lying to me these past few years. You've been building a nuclear weapon in our basement while pretending to be a good father and husband. And to think, I had actually come to love you... to be willing to be a woman for you... to spread my legs for you and bear your children!'

Naturally, I didn't say any of that. What I said was, "I'm just a little tired, with the pregnancy and all..."

He nodded. "I understand. Someone told me boys are harder to carry than girls."

And I was even willing to name him after you! Now, I'd sooner name him after Adolf Hitler. At least Hitler for the most part had never looked into the eyes of those he killed.

"Just a few more days," he commented.

My blood ran cold at the way he said it. "A few more days?"

"Of your pregnancy," he clarified, pulling up to the curb. "What did you think I meant? You look upset."

"No—I'm fine," I lied, unbuckling my belt and getting out to help Rachel out of her car seat.

"I'll get her," Kenny volunteered. "You shouldn't be lifting anything as heavy as Rachel. Are you sure you're all right? We could always go home."

"I'll be fine," I reiterated, trying unsuccessfully to hide the tension in my voice.

And I was fine—or at least better—once I got into the house. Kenny joined his dad in the den to watch the Chiefs who were playing in an early game on the East Coast. They had a full day of football planned. While Oklahoma lacked an NFL team, most of its residents supported either Kansas City or Dallas—or both. That Sunday, the Kansas City Chiefs played an early East Coast game while the Dallas Cowboys were on the West Coast with a later game. That meant six hours of football—six hours in which I wouldn't have to pretend to Kenny that everything was all right. Thankfully, Martha Lee wasn't supposed to be a big football fan, and to be perfectly honest, I really had lost much of my interest in the game after my transformation.

Larissa and I retired to the kitchen. Larissa had never cared much for football, and while I had been a fan of the New England Patriots before my transformation, I had, as I said, found football to be less

important over the years. Besides, sitting in the kitchen discussing (we never gossiped—we discussed) what had happened in Ovid over the past few days felt much more normal than sitting and counting the hours until I could see The Judge.

For a while, I was actually able to lose myself in Larissa's news. While Maggie and the rest of my coffee klatch usually discussed what was really happening in Ovid with all of the machinations of the gods, Larissa knew none of that, telling me instead what most residents of Ovid probably regarded as the true reality of Ovid.

As the day went on, I found myself growing more and more envious of Larissa and Jude. True, they were shades, but they didn't know that (Or at least I think they didn't know that). To me, they just seemed to be a couple in late middle age who had raised a successful son, built a thriving business in a pleasant little town, and were now preparing to spend the rest of their lives doing what they wanted to do—travel and socialize with their friends and family.

Watching Jude and Larissa as they briefly but warmly touched each other and looked momentarily but meaningfully into each other's eyes made me pine for a life I had never quite come to accept and appreciate, but now...

Now, the life I might have had was about to come to an end.

Looking back over the years, I thought it was ironic that I had squandered a second chance. When Hannah and I found ourselves in Ovid, we were two lost souls whose attempt at love and happiness had somehow taken a wrong turn. Our marriage had become loveless, childless, and hopeless. Had we somehow survived the bridge disaster and returned to Washington, we would have split up within months—maybe weeks. Nothing could have prevented that.

What would have happened then? Well, Hannah would have probably gone on to a stellar career, mentored by the Ice Queen, possibly marrying someone else—probably someone as ambitious as she was. Together, they would have been the toast of the Washington bureaucracy.

Me? I would have probably plugged along at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, just one more lonely drone in the hive of government. I suppose I might have even remarried, but it wouldn't have been someone I felt about as I had once felt about Hannah. We had met in college, back when I was young and ambitious and before I discovered that pushing paper for a living only dulled the mind and blunted ambition.

In our new roles, I realized only now that we had become the persons we were meant to be. Hannah—now Kenny—could be ambitious, growing the family business, garnering the admiration of his parents, and providing for his growing family. It was a role Hannah would have loved, perhaps accepting it voluntarily if given the chance. Of course, I had thought she had lost all of her previous memories, but now that I knew her to be a sleeper agent for some unknown power, I realized she had merely continued travelling the path to professional success she had always wanted.

As for me... When I was first transformed, I saw myself as a man jammed unwillingly into the body of a woman. Sure, I had participated in sex as a woman, even coming to enjoy it, but in many ways, I was simply continuing the role I had settled into as a man—plugging along, taking the path of least resistance. The world I had been thrust into saw me as a woman, so that's what I would become, albeit reluctantly.

I had continually told myself that if given the opportunity, I would gladly become a man again, but now, as my stable and comfortable life was about to be disrupted—perhaps forever—I realized just how lucky I had been.

In the past since my transformation, there had never been a moment in which I experienced an epiphany in which I took joy in being a woman. When I first felt the pleasure of sex as a woman, a voice in the back of my mind told me how messy periods would be and how painful childbirth was. When I first looked at myself in the mirror and saw how lovely I was, I could only think of what a pain it was going to be to apply makeup and tend to long hair. When Rachel was born, all I could think of was that Kenny as Hannah should be going through the

discomfort instead of me.

Now though, these were golden moments, to be treasured, for there would be no more in the future. Once I had told The Judge, I would have no Kenny to look lovely for. When I delivered our second child, there would be no Kenny there to hold my hand and tell me I was doing fine. And as for the sex... I couldn't see myself getting interested in anyone other than Kenny.

Of course, I could not tell The Judge what I had found in the basement, and all of those things would go on for a little longer, but it wouldn't be the same. I would always know the bomb was there, ready to be detonated the minute the core was installed. And there was little doubt in my mind that the bomb wasn't just being built as some sort of perverted deterrent. Clandestine bombs were made to be used—suddenly, relentlessly, and insidiously. I had no idea who had spurred Kenny to build the bomb, but whoever they were, their obvious goal was to obliterate Ovid and everyone in it.

I just couldn't allow that to happen—even if the price was any hope of a future with Kenny.

I did my best to join in the conversation at dinner, but I didn't do a very good job of it. The situation was so preposterous—there I was, sitting in a scene that seemed to be a valid subject for a Norman Rockwell painting, and yet sitting next to me was a man who might soon become the biggest mass murderer in the history of the United States.

"How are things at the bank?" Jude asked, slicing a generous portion of meat from the rib roast in the center of the table.

"Fine," I managed to answer, pretending to be occupied with cutting up Rachel's dinner into smaller pieces.

"I saw Rachel Tilton the other day," Larissa chimed in. "I played golf with her at the club." She sighed. "I don't know how that woman does it. She looks like she's thirty years old."

"She's got old Charlie acting like he's thirty, too," Jude chuckled.

"Jude!" Larissa admonished.

“Well she does.”

I had to smile to myself. Rachel was a transformee and a former male as well. We had become friends and the Tiltons had become Rachel’s godparents. Rachel was even named for my boss’s wife. Of course, Jude and Larissa had no idea that Rachel Tilton was now a different person than the one they had known several years earlier. The former male had replaced Rachel a few months after I came to Ovid.

“Barry Hartman—the kid Jennifer Tilton has been dating for a while—worked this past summer for me as a lot boy,” Kenny added. “He’s a good kid. He and Jennifer both want to go to Capta next year. I wouldn’t be surprised to see them get married.”

Yeah, I wouldn’t either, I thought, if Ovid wasn’t vaporized by your bomb before then.

Instead of making me feel better, the dinner table conversation was making me feel worse. Every sentence seemed to remind me of what a wonderful place Ovid was, filled with wonderful people who would all be dead if I didn’t do something about it.

The evening was convivial enough that fortunately no one really noticed how little I had to say. Kenny and his parents managed to keep the conversation going, so I was required only to throw in an occasional comment. They didn’t even notice my relative silence or the worried look that I couldn’t always hide.

Fortunately, Kenny was tired when we got home that evening. He got ready for bed while I put Rachel down for the night, and by the time I got ready for bed, Kenny was already snoring peacefully away. I was glad of it. Making nice all evening with a spouse who was preparing to end all that I had come to cherish was not something I wanted to do.

The thoughts of what could happen made for a restless night. Even when I did drop off to sleep, my dreams were plagued with thoughts of destruction. I dreamed I had gone to the basement to destroy the bomb only to find Kenny there, grinning malevolently as he prepared to push a button setting the horrible device off. It didn’t matter that I hadn’t seen a button anywhere on the bomb. It was only a dream, but

it was a dream that brought me up gasping for breath, and a dream worrisome enough that my unborn son kicked me hard, disturbed from his prenatal slumber by the tension in my body.

But dawn came at last. Rachel was up earlier than usual, so I had to foist her off on Kenny while I got ready for work. As he took her gently from my arms, I couldn't help thinking that it might be the last time he had the opportunity to hold his daughter in his arms. I nearly cried at the thought.

As I showered, I began to wonder if I was doing the right thing. Oh, I don't mean there was any way I'd allow the almost-finished bomb to remain in existence, but perhaps if I talked with Kenny... tried to reason with him, I could get him to give up this insane project. If I could only make him see how he was not only wrecking his life, but the lives of everyone around him as well.

By the end of my shower though, I had reluctantly decided against it. If Kenny was truly committed to whatever cause that had compelled him to build the terrible device, he might turn on me and kill me to prevent my going to the authorities.

Could Kenny kill me? I really didn't think so, in spite of everything. I hoped he couldn't. But I was the female now—smaller, weaker, and unable to defend myself properly should Kenny attack me. No, as much as I still loved Kenny, I had to think of others—Rachel, our unborn son, and all of the rest of my new friends and family who would be harmed if I made the wrong decision.

"You look great today, Martha," Kenny told me with a smile. By the time I had joined him in the kitchen, he had already gotten Rachel set up with her favorite breakfast of Honey Nut Cheerios and a sliced banana. She was happily gulping down a sippy cup of milk.

"Thanks," I said absently, trying not to notice how handsome he looked sitting there in his sport coat and tie. "I'll take Rachel now."

"No, you look like you could use some help today," Kenny said,

scooting back from the table, leaving the last of his juice, which was all he ever had for breakfast. "I'll drop her off at day-care."

"Yay! Daddy's taking me to day-care!" Rachel laughed, her eyes twinkling at her father as she raised her arms to him. It was all I could do to keep from crying.

Actually, I did break down and cry as soon as they left. My family was in ruins. In less than an hour, I'd see The Judge and Kenny would be... what? Changed? Killed? Whatever happened to him, he would be lost from us forever. Maybe The Judge would provide me with a new Kenny—a shade perhaps or someone newly transformed. But it just wouldn't be the same. It wouldn't be my Kenny.

I had to wait until my eyes dried to do my makeup. Time was slipping by, and I wondered if I was intentionally or subconsciously trying to be late so as to miss The Judge. Somehow, I managed to pull myself together in time, with just the tiniest tinge of red still in my eyes. I didn't think The Judge would notice though. I was just picking up my purse and keys when the doorbell rang.

'Who could be calling so early in the morning?' I wondered. Then I looked out the front window and saw George there with a loaner car idling in the driveway. Then I remembered. George was due to take my car in for an oil change and a wash. I had been so rattled after finding the bomb that I had completely forgotten about it. I threw open the door after a quick look at my watch. If I was able to get rid of George in five minutes, I might still be in time to see The Judge.

"Hi, George."

"Hi, Martha Lee," George said in his syrupy Oklahoma twang. As nearly as I had ever been able to tell, George had no memories of a previous life, but his love for cars and his skill working on them led me to believe he was doing what he must have done before his transformation. "You need me to gas your car up, too?"

"Oh would you, George?" I said, handing him the keys. "I hope you don't mind, but I have to run. I have an appointment. Can I get the keys for the loaner?"

“Right here,” George said proudly. “I got a nice little Stratus for you today,” he added, pointing at the red coupe he had driven over in.

“Thanks, George!” I called out, locking the door and heading for the Dodge, nearly stumbling in my high heels. “I’ll have more time to talk to you later.”

“Better slow down,” he cautioned. “I don’t know how you women walk in those shoes anyway.”

It was a question I still asked myself sometimes.

I pulled into the parking lot at City Hall with two minutes to spare. There was a knot in my stomach the size of a basketball as I slid out of the car. Except for church and an occasional sighting of him on Main Street, I hadn’t seen The Judge since my transformation, and as for speaking to him... well, who would want to talk to a being who could completely overturn your life with a few well-chosen words in something resembling Latin?

“Am I late?” I blurted out as I came to a halt in front of Cindy’s desk. I instinctively brushed back a stray lock of hair, hoping I didn’t look too disheveled.

“Right on time,” Cindy said with a smile as I entered her office. “The Judge likes that. I’ll see if he’s ready for you.”

She got up from her desk and headed for The Judge’s chambers. She was so calm and cheerful. I wondered how she could do it—working for a god every day. Wasn’t she afraid of him? Everything I had ever heard about the gods led me to believe they were nothing if not capricious. Yet Cindy had been in Ovid nearly as long as I had and had worked for The Judge all of that time.

Who knows? Maybe The Judge just liked having a sexy little blonde sashaying around the office. Cindy was a few years older than I was—or at least older than Martha Lee was—and yet she maintained a very nice figure for a woman who had borne three kids. Oh, she could probably stand to lose a pound or two, but I only hoped I could look as good as she did in another decade—assuming, of course, that we all

had another decade to live.

“He’ll see you now,” Cindy said when she returned. She looked down at my feet. “Nice shoes, by the way.”

Cindy was so darned feminine. It seemed that almost every time I met her, she would comment on something I wore. “Thanks,” I replied, knowing how to continue the ritual. “I got them at March’s last week.” I daintily lifted my foot, turning my ankle slightly so she could get a better look at my three-inch black pumps. “They were on sale.”

“I’ll have to see if they have that in my size,” Cindy told me, completing the feminine exchange. “Would you like some coffee?”

“No thanks.” I would have loved some, but I was so nervous I was afraid I’d spill it all over myself. Or worse yet, I might spill it all over The Judge. I wondered what I’d end up being if I spilled a cup of hot coffee all over a god.

She led me into The Judge’s chambers. The god was reading a thick document as I entered. He looked up from his large oak desk and disarmed me with a pleasant smile. “Martha Lee, how good to see you.” He rose and took my hand, covering it with his other hand. I nearly jumped away, unsure about allowing a god to touch me, but his hands felt warm and dry, and I felt somehow comforted by the gesture.

“Sit down,” he directed, motioning to a comfortable leather chair angled his desk. He didn’t go back behind his desk, choosing instead to sit in a similar chair, partially facing me. “Now what can I do for you?”

I actually became light headed. I had expected the gruff, humorless justice I had faced the day of my transformation. Instead, I was presented with a fatherly gentleman who seemed nothing like the image of a god I had come to expect. Perhaps the gods were more like us than we realized—friendly and happy one day and distant and sad the next. There was so much we didn’t know about them.

“It’s about my husband...” I began when suddenly and without any

warning, I began to sob.

The Judge actually looked alarmed. Drawing on his divine nature for the first time during our meeting, he produced a tissue out of thin air, much in the manner of a stage magician. I accepted it gratefully. "I'm sorry," I began between sobs.

"Your husband, you say," he prompted when I was a little calmer. "Is Kenny all right?"

I shook my head. "No... I mean, yes. Physically, he's fine, but he's... he's..." I just couldn't get it out.

"Please," The Judge said in a comforting tone. "Allow me..." He placed the fingers of his right hand gently against my forehead. I didn't understand at first: then I realized he must be reading my thoughts, but there was no evidence of that. Instead, what he did seemed to calm me down enough to speak again.

"Kenny has a... a... bomb in our basement," I managed to blurt out.

He stared at me, dispassionately at first, as if the statement had been so ridiculous that it didn't require any reaction at all. But that soon turned to confusion and finally to alarm. "A bomb?"

I nodded, and managed to whimper, "Yes... a bomb. A nuclear bomb."

"Nuclear?"

I nodded.

The Judge leaned back in his chair, and to my amazement, a small smile played across his lips. "Yes, that's exactly what she would do."

"What who would do?" I asked.

"You already know," was his reply. "Don't you?"

"The Ice Queen?"

"Of course. Officer Mercer!"

"Yes, Your Honor," a voice came from behind me. I turned to see Officer Mercer standing there. I knew he hadn't been there a moment before. So myths of Mercury's incredible speed were true after all. I

wondered where he had been before The Judge had called him.

“Please check Martha Lee’s basement. You’re looking for an atomic bomb in a storage room just next to the work area.”

“At once.”

And as suddenly as he had arrived, he was gone. I thought I detected a slight blur passing through the doorway, but I wasn’t certain.

“What’s going to happen to Kenny?” I asked hesitantly, not really wanting to know the answer.

The Judge’s face turned grim, to my dismay. “I haven’t decided just yet.”

“Your Honor,” I began, “I didn’t want this life you gave me, but I’ve come to appreciate it... and to love Kenny. Please, don’t do anything to him. I... I...” Then the tears began again.

The Judge was surprisingly gentle, leaning over and putting his hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry,” he soothed me, “it will all work out fine.”

In retrospect, he didn’t exactly promise me anything. Had I been clear in my thinking, I might have asked, “Fine for whom?” I didn’t, though. I sniffed a little and nodded my head in silent thanks. I’m sure now that The Judge did more than just soothe me with comforting words. After all, the powers he could exert over our minds and forms were considerable. I’m sure he wanted me calm when I went home, so as not to trigger any suspicions on Kenny’s part.

On the other hand, he seemed quite sincere. Like many Ovid residents, I had read quite a bit about the Graeco-Roman god he was supposed to be. While Jupiter could be quite arbitrary much of the time, he seemed to have a genuine affection for humans. I like to think that when he touched my shoulder that day, he really wanted what was best for me. It’s probably something I’ll never know for sure, but in that moment as he comforted me, I felt an intense loyalty to him. Although to this day I have no idea why he created Ovid or why he chose to populate it with otherwise-doomed humans, but I have much more faith in his judgment than before.

“Here’s what I want you to do,” he told me calmly. “Just go home and try to act normally around your husband.”

“He’s not a bad man...” I broke in, trying very hard to believe it myself.

The Judge nodded. “I know he isn’t. He may not even be aware of what he’s doing. The important thing is not to alert him to any suspicions you have. If someone else is controlling him, they may become aware of your suspicions and take inadvisable action.”

Yeah. Unadvisable—like vaporizing the entire town.

“But what about the bomb? I don’t want it left under my house.”

“I’m afraid it must remain there for the time being,” The Judge replied. “To move it would alert those who wanted it built.”

“Oh, right.”

“I can assure you though, that we will make certain the bomb is never armed. You have my word on that. Now that we’re aware of it, we can monitor it closely.”

I sighed, “All right. I just want this over quickly. I swear I’m so nervous I feel like the baby is coming any minute.”

As if to emphasize my words, I felt a sudden and very determined kick from my womb. It was almost as if my baby could understand every word I was saying.

“There’s one other thing I need to do for you,” The Judge said.

“What’s that?”

“It’s likely Kenny is working on the bomb while you’re in the house. I’d like to put a little spell on you. When he tries to hypnotize you or put you to sleep, the spell will make it look as if he succeeded. But you will be able to remember everything that happens around you.”

I was naturally suspicious of any spell The Judge might use on me. Just look what had happened the last time he did. “Is this really necessary?”

The Judge nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"All right," I sighed, bracing myself for what came next. Although he muttered a few words just as he had when I had been transformed, nothing seemed to happen this time except a momentary feeling of warmth. "Is that all?" I asked as the feeling went away.

"That's all," he replied.

"Well, that wasn't so bad."

"Do you need anyone to drive you home?" he asked solicitously.

I shook my head. "No, I've got to get to work." I gave him a little smile, contrasting with what had to be tear-stained eyes. "If I don't go to work, everyone will suspect something is wrong."

And go work I did. I left The Judge's office as quickly as I could, stopping only to look at my face in the restroom mirror. What a damned girly girl I had become, I silently admonished myself. The old me would never have broken down in tears, even if I had been Will turning in Hannah to The Judge. Of course, I reminded myself, Willis and Hannah had been a lost cause. Kenny and Martha Lee weren't—or at least hadn't been until I'd discovered that damned bomb.

Thankfully, I got out of City Hall without seeing anyone too closely. I had repaired my makeup, but I was sure my eyes were still a little red. I turned the air conditioning in the car up to maximum, aiming the vents directly at my face to remove the red. By the time I had parked in the bank's employee parking lot, my eyes looked fine. I just hoped nothing happened to set me off crying again. I was afraid it wouldn't take much.

"Where were you this morning?" Connie asked me as I slipped my purse into an empty desk drawer.

"Dentist," I lied.

I tried not to look her in the eye, but I could tell she was looking at me with skepticism. "I thought you just saw the dentist a couple of weeks ago."

“Just a follow-up visit,” I elaborated, trying to make it sound as if it wasn’t a big deal. Fortunately, Connie didn’t ask anything further. If she had, even with The Judge’s conditioning, I might have yelled out at one of my best friends to tell her to mind her own business. I just wasn’t in any mood to explain my actions.

I was able to throw myself into my work. Fortunately, it was due to be a busy week. I was trying to get as much out of the way as possible before I went on thirty days of maternity leave. I tried not to think about the bomb and succeeded for a while at least, but the engineer in me came to the surface in the hour between my only loan closing and lunch with Connie. What remained of Willis Perry, trained engineer, had some serious questions to ask.

Of course, I was intimately familiar with nuclear weapons. Anyone who has ever worked with nuclear energy has studied the design. For that matter, anyone can build a primitive nuclear device. The hard part is obtaining the fissionable material for it. Essentially, the bomb in my basement was similar to the famed Little Boy bomb that had been dropped on Hiroshima. That bomb was about as primitive as an atomic bomb can be and still function. In the Little Boy, a sub-critical core of highly enriched uranium weighing about eighty-five pounds sits at one end of the bomb while a projectile weighing fifty-five pounds or so is slammed into it with high explosives. The resulting mass becomes critical, producing a highly inefficient but extremely destructive explosion.

In the Hiroshima bomb, less than two percent of the fissionable material actually produced an explosion. The result was the equivalent of about fifteen thousand tons of TNT. I estimated the shock wave from the bomb would be sufficient to reach the edges of the suspected pocket universe containing Ovid, reverberating back upon itself several times in the process. Ovid would be obliterated.

But The Judge hadn’t seemed overly worried. Could it be that gods would be able to survive a nuclear blast? No, I doubted that they could. Otherwise, why would someone go to the trouble of nuking Ovid? Surely the evil minds that had plotted the building of such a

weapon knew the nature of Ovid and its best-known inhabitants.

‘But why would anyone want to destroy Ovid? Or for that matter, why would the gods bother to create Ovid?’ Those last two questions I had to set aside. The more important question was ‘what was The Judge doing to stop the bomb from being completed?’

As I said, he didn’t seem overly concerned, but in retrospect, I think that might have been an act for my benefit. After all, he knew I would be extremely upset, and I’m sure he wanted me to be as calm as possible since I would have to not let on to Kenny that I suspected a thing.

Perhaps as I sat there worrying about it, he or more likely Officer Mercer was at my house dismantling the device. Hopefully, I would come home and find the terrible weapon gone.

But would Kenny be gone, too?

I was sickened at the thought. I still loved Kenny in spite of everything and didn’t want to lose him. I wanted to think he was nothing but an unwitting pawn, doing the bidding of some unknown master—most likely the Ice Queen. But maybe that was hoping for too much. Maybe he was doing it willingly.

But why would he do it? That was still an unanswered question—one of many, but one of extreme importance to me. Did he believe in what he was doing? Was he doing it in return for some reward—possibly a return to his old female life (or one similar to it, given that I now understood that in the outside world, we had never existed)? Or was he being blackmailed? I wanted so much to tell him that I knew and that somehow we could work everything out.

“Are you okay?” Connie asked at lunch.

In my mind, I was calculating potential yields from roughly a hundred and forty pounds of enriched uranium. Skills I hadn’t used in several years were pushing to the front of my mind again. I had thought I would be able to carry on a reasonable conversation with Connie over lunch, but my concerns were too important to listen to my friend with

my full attention.

“I’m sorry, Connie,” I said sincerely, toying with my fork in a salad that would have normally tasted wonderful. “It’s just...” I didn’t know how to explain. How do you tell one of your best friends that your husband has been busily building a nuclear weapon in your basement? As bizarre as Connie surely knew that things could be in Ovid, that would be a hard one to swallow.

“Is the baby okay?”

There was a look of alarm on Connie’s face. I recognized it well. Connie was three months along with her first child, and like me and probably most of the former men in Ovid, the idea of childbirth was daunting to say the least.

“The baby’s fine,” I assured her, feeling the little guy shifting around inside me. “I’ve just been so... busy lately, with work and family.”

“Is your mother coming in for the delivery?” she asked. Of course we both knew that my ‘mother’ was really a shade who supposedly lived in Muskogee. She and my ersatz father and sister visited occasionally, and I even chatted with them on the phone. I couldn’t help but wonder where they went when they left Ovid. I knew our trips to visit them were all in our minds, so I wasn’t sure if they came into existence just to see or talk to us or if they really lived in Muskogee, completely innocuous as far as the real residents were concerned. Ah, another mystery of Ovid.

“She and dad are coming after the baby’s born,” I told her. “Right now, they’re back east. My sister is attending Ohio State this fall.”

Connie nodded. Of course she knew it might be all a Judge-inspired fiction as well, but we all played along. It was the easiest way to cope with the fantastic nature of Ovid.

“If there’s anything I can do to help...”

I made a brave face and managed to smile. “Thanks, Connie, but I’ll be fine. Kenny’s mother is going to be there with me.”

But would she be there after The Judge and Officer Mercer had

hauled her son off to an unpleasant fate? Or would she even know about it? Maybe Kenny would disappear from everyone's memory, just as Willis and Hannah Perry had disappeared from the minds of those who had known us outside of Ovid. I nearly cried again at the thought.

"If there's anything I can do to help," Connie offered, "let me know."

I was very touched. "Thanks, Connie."

Later, I wondered why I hadn't invited Connie to our Saturday morning coffee. I had made a couple of feeble attempts, but usually I assumed she had something better to do with her time. She and her husband continued their pattern of outdoor activities after their marriage, so even the times I had offered, she had declined to attend.

I found myself yearning to meet with the women who had become my Saturday morning compatriots. And by Saturday, I might be in a delivery room. Maybe, I thought, I should take a day off and invite all of them over for a special coffee. Yeah, that would be a good idea. Denise just worked a few hours a week doing the books for her husband, and Colleen was currently taking time off from work until her little ones got a bit older. Maggie didn't work outside the home at all, and I was pretty well caught up at work for the moment. We'd have a special gathering!

It was too late to bake anything, but I could go by Duggan's IGA after I picked up Rachel and get a coffee cake at their bakery. It wouldn't be as good as homemade, but their bakery was pretty good.

Connie was with a client as I called the rest of my friends. I had fully intended to see if she could get off work tomorrow morning and join us, but then I decided that wouldn't be a good idea since she would be needed to cover for me. The rest of the girls thought it was a great idea, so we were on for nine o'clock. By that time, all of our husbands would be off to work, so it would just be the four of us and the kids.

I rushed around like a madwoman but still got home in time to fix a simple dinner for my family. First, I had to go get my minivan back. George had it sparkling like new. He even changed out Rachel's car seat for me. Then I picked up Rachel at day-care and shot by

Duggan's to get a coffee cake and something quick for dinner.

It wasn't easy, but I got through the evening without raising Kenny's suspicions. Maybe I was just so frayed from such a busy day, coupled with the feeling of being tired that comes from lugging a nearly-term baby around. In any case, Kenny did notice I was stressed, but obviously chalked it up to baby and work. He left me alone to relax and even did the dishes for me.

I did go out to get a little fresh air. It was dark and getting late, and anyone else might have missed him standing there completely still in front of some tall bushes a couple of houses away. I didn't miss him though, but to be honest, I was looking for him. Only Officer Mercer could stand there so straight and so tall. He was watching the house. I wondered how he could determine if anything was going on from so far away. Then I realized from the position he had taken that he had a clear shot of our basement window. If Kenny went to the basement to work on the bomb, Officer Mercer would be sure to see him.

But what if Kenny sneaked downstairs without turning on the light? I smiled to myself. Maybe Officer Mercer could see just fine in the dark. There was nothing in any myth I had read about the gods that said they could see well in the dark, but nothing said they couldn't either. If I had to make a bet, I would say they could see in the dark just fine.

Relieved that someone was watching out for me, I made my way back inside, checked on Rachel to make sure she was asleep, and got ready for bed. Kenny was watching something innocuous on TV but managed to come in and kiss me goodnight. I almost wished that he hadn't, since it reminded me again what a great husband he had become.

Thankfully, I dropped off to sleep at once, exhausted from a busy day. Tomorrow would be a very different day, I promised myself.

I had no idea then just how right I was.

"I'm staying home today," I announced to Kenny. Sitting there at the

kitchen table in a wine-colored t-shirt and maternity overalls certainly showed him I wasn't planning on going to work.

"Don't you feel good?" he asked solicitously, taking my small hands in his large ones. "Do you want me to stay home with you?"

I shook my head, my ponytail flipping back and forth emphatically.

"No, I'll be fine. I'm just tired from yesterday. I'll just keep Rachel home from day-care today and putter around the house." I could have told him the girls were coming over, but I didn't want to admit to playing hooky.

"Well," he drawled dubiously as he grabbed his sport coat, "call me at the office if you change your mind. I can always change my schedule around."

Sure, I thought. Sell a car here; build a bomb there. Schedule changes are no problem. "I'll be fine."

The minute I heard his car start, I jumped up (or as much as a pregnant lady can jump up) and grabbed some of my special coffee. I noted I was getting a little low on coffee. I'd have to order some more. All the girls thought it was great, but Kenny didn't like it—too mild he had told me. He preferred to get a cup of bitter, strong mud at the office. Oh well, all the more for us, I thought, carefully measuring three scoops of beans into the grinder.

Maggie was the first to show up—without her twin boys.

"Where are Gary and Larry?" I asked, handing her a cup of coffee.

"Babysitter's," Maggie replied. "I'm getting my hair done and having lunch at the country club today." That explained why she was wearing yellow heels and a matching dress.

"Aw!" Rachel called out from in front of the TV where Barney was singing one of his inane songs.

"Maybe you can play with the twins later today," I told her.

"Okay!"

"Don't worry," Maggie told Rachel. "I talked to Danny's mom and she's

bringing him and Monica over.”

“Yay!”

“And Denise is bringing Carla and Misty,” I reminded Rachel.

“Yay!”

Maggie and I looked at each other and giggled. “I think Rachel looks forward to these gatherings as much as we do,” Maggie grinned.

I grinned back. Everything felt almost normal. I almost–almost–forgot about what was lurking in the basement. And by the time that Colleen and Denise showed up, I really had forgotten about it.

It would have just been a normal morning if it hadn’t been for...

I felt strange. The four of us were sitting there in the kitchen while the kids were all in the den being mesmerized by whatever cheery little show PBS Kids had running. We had talked about what we always talked about–husbands, kids, the latest Ovid gossip (or at least as much as we could talk about without involving the nature of Ovid’s real rulers) when the conversation drifted down to nothing.

We all sat there, just staring out into space. For me, it was as if I was observing our group from some other vantage point. I knew instinctively that this was The Judge’s spell to counteract any hypnosis kicking in. I began to feel panicked. What was happening? Kenny wasn’t even here. How could we be falling into a trance? I was completely alert but I was like a passenger in my own body. And judging from the looks on my friends’ faces, I wasn’t alone.

“All right,” I heard myself say. “Maggie, you watch the kids today. You’re not dressed for this.”

“Yes,” Maggie replied tonelessly, rising from the table to go into the den. Once there, she broke into a normal-looking smile. All of the children accepted her presence but continued watching TV.

I nodded in satisfaction that the children wouldn’t disturb us.

“Denise, Colleen, we need to get the core out of the van.”

What?

“Be sure to wear the gloves next to the package,” my voice admonished. “The containers are safe, but the gloves will give you a better grip.”

Denise and Colleen got up from the table and headed to the garage. My body turned and walked toward the basement door. The odd thing was how little anxiety I felt. I suppose anxiety is, to a great extent, forced upon the mind by the body, and my body was perfectly calm. Unfortunately, that also seemed to mean I had no mental control over my body. It was a little bit like the experience I had encountered when Connie first told me how to put my body on automatic. That had been very helpful at first, allowing me to dress, do my makeup, and a score of other mundane feminine chores without thinking about them. The big difference was that then I could will my body back to my mental control. Right now, I was nothing more than an unwilling passenger in my own body.

I took the key from its hiding place in the back of the drawer of Kenny’s workbench. Without even looking at the lock, I slipped the key into the keyhole and pushed open the door to the storage room where the bomb awaited me. I felt my face contort into a smile at the sight of the weapon. And at last, I could feel another presence with me in that room.

It really came as no surprise to me when I realized Freda Jorgenson was sharing my mind. Thanks to The Judge’s spell, I was still alert albeit helpless as the Ice Queen made deft adjustments to the trigger mechanism of the bomb, preparing it to receive the core. How many times had she done this to me? Dozens or more, I suspected—probably every time the four of us got together for coffee.

I found if I concentrated very hard, I could actually detect some of her surface thoughts. The patterns of her deeper mind seemed not so much hidden to me as they were incomprehensible. I began to suspect that the Ice Queen was not entirely human. I also suspected she wasn’t really in my mind. Her thoughts were of the surface variety: Go there. Do this. I think I had just enough of her mind overlaid on

mine to do assigned tasks but nothing else. Was she like The Judge? Maybe. There was no sense in speculating about that now, though.

By sorting through her surface thoughts though, I was able to see how she had done this to me. It went back to that party at the British embassy where I had first met her. We had been talking together—that much I remembered—when she began slowly and stealthily to take control of my mind. I hadn't even realized it was happening: neither had anyone around us. It was as if she had somehow removed us from the room without physically moving us. It was just as if people saw us but didn't really take notice of it. It was a neat trick: I had to admit that.

"Remember this number..." she was saying to me as I sat there completely open to her suggestions. I did remember it, too. I still knew it: it was in my phone file upstairs. It was the name of a small, premium coffee roaster near Washington... a firm I had done business with since arriving in Ovid. They made the best tasting coffee. I used it every week for our coffee klatch.

I have no idea to this day how the coffee worked, but now I do know the results. All four of us would drink our fill, be discussing all the things that women friends discuss when they get together, and suddenly lose track of time. It was then that the Ice Queen struck. After exerting direct control over me, she would extend it to the others through some special bond the coffee created. That was how the four of us were able to carry on conversations about the nature of Ovid that other foursomes were unable to do. It was because for all practical purposes, we were linked, as if we were of one mind.

I heard the door to the garage close. Colleen and Denise would be coming in with the first part of the core. I had told them to get it out of the van. But how did it end up in the van? I wasn't sure, but I had an idea. It's amazing how many ideas were coming to me now that I was trapped here, a passenger in my own body.

It had to be someone at Ovid Chrysler—probably George. He always serviced my car personally. It would have been easy for him to store the parts needed for the bomb in my van. They were probably shipped

in as car parts—an extra alternator here, a new transmission there. Auto parts could be heavy and bulky. No one would think twice about a package being trucked in from Mopar, and as service manager, George could easily divert any ‘extra’ parts.

So was George one of Jorgenson’s minions, or was he just another unfortunate puppet like me and my friends? I hoped I’d have time to sort that one out. The fact that the core was being installed wasn’t a good sign. It was foolish to have a nuclear weapon just sitting around in Ovid unless Freda planned to use it soon.

Colleen and Denise were average-sized women, and the core parts were heavy, especially with the shielding around them. I suspected the shielding was there more to avoid detection and not for our safety. After all, there appeared to be no remote transmitter on the bomb. I suspected it would be manually triggered, and that none of us were expected to survive the experience.

“It goes right here,” I heard myself say, pointing to an innocuous-looking cradle at one end of the bomb. Once in place, the cannon assembly could be reseated. Then the other part of the core would be inserted in the cannon. A trigger could then be attached, and in no more than an hour, the bomb could be ready to fire.

It wasn’t an elegant device: it didn’t have to be, I realized. So what if it was inefficient? How efficient did it have to be to take out Ovid?

I wondered if the gods could be destroyed by the blast. Probably, I told myself. Otherwise, Freda Jorgenson wouldn’t be wasting her time blowing the rest of us up, would she? I didn’t think so.

But how had she known that I would be available in Ovid to build the bomb for her? Granted, I was the perfect person to build the bomb. Anyone with my professional background could do it. But how did she know I’d be trapped in Ovid? For that matter, given the number of transformed people who lost the memories of their previous lives, how would she know I wouldn’t be affected?

As far as making sure I wouldn’t be affected, maybe she had done something to me—a spell or something. Or maybe she had the ability

to recognize who would retain their memories and who would not. Or maybe she just took a chance on me, and if I had failed to be able to help her, maybe someone else bound for Ovid could.

So the burning question, I realized as I watched helplessly as my hands nimbly fitted the target portion of the core into place, was how did she know I was coming to Ovid in the first place?

Before I could address that, a sharp pain shot through my side.

“Are you okay?” Colleen asked.

“Fine,” I heard myself answer curtly. “The little bastard just kicked me!”

Way to go, Kenny Junior, I cheered to myself. If the bitch who has taken control of my body has her way, you’ll never be born, so you might as well get your licks in now. As if in response, he kicked again. Maybe he really could hear me. I was finding the bond between a mother and her unborn child almost defies description. Add to that the linking ability my mind must have developed to bend my friends to my will, and...

“Maybe you should rest,” Colleen offered. I could see she was as helpless to stop what she was doing as I was, so I suspected that the advice was less from concern for my body than it was for completion of the mission.

“I said I’d be fine,” my body responded, but if she felt what I felt, she wasn’t as fine as she let on. “Get the rest of the core.”

“At once!” Colleen and Denise replied in unison.

I might not be able to control my body, or influence its actions in any way, but perhaps in this subordinated mental state, I actually could contact the baby. ‘Kenny,’ I thought as hard as I could, ‘are you there?’

What came in response was not so much a word as a feeling: ‘Here... here...’

I hesitated. To be honest, I was actually surprised to get an answer.

Maybe all expectant mothers can communicate with their unborn children if they can shut enough of the outside world off. I was completely shut off, relegated to a tiny part of my mind while Freda's persona called the shots.

'Here...'

'Kenny, kick me really hard.'

Nothing happened. I began to think what I had thought I heard in my mind had been just wishful thinking. Then I realized that Kenny was not mature enough to really understand me. When he had responded to me, it was nothing more than a reaction to my call. He probably had not really said "here." Instead, my mind had interpreted his wordless response at the correct term. When I told him to kick, he probably had no idea what it meant. I had to show him rather than tell him.

I was losing track of what my body was doing. I wasn't sure if Colleen and Denise had brought the rest of the core in yet or not. I didn't dare lose my concentration on Kenny, though. If I did, I wasn't sure I could get it back.

I tried to visualize movement: I tried to make Kenny realize what a kick was.

Kick!

There it was! Or was it just coincidence? I tried to convey my thoughts to him again.

Kick!

"Oh no!" I heard my body groan.

I was aware of my surroundings again. Colleen and Denise stood there in front of me, worried looks on their faces.

Kick! Kick!

I felt something wet—something I had only felt once before in my life.

"Her water broke!" Colleen gasped.

Making a baby (sex if you will) is lots of fun—even (or maybe even

especially) for a former man. Holding your newborn baby in your arms for the first time is a feeling of awe and accomplishment unmatched in human experience. But having a baby...

Don't let anyone fool you. Having a baby is pure hell.

While I might have no physical control over my body, that did not mean that I didn't feel the pain. I felt it very well, thank you very much. Little Kenny was ready to be born, and now, he was in a battle for possession of my body, and whatever power had assumed control of me to assemble and arm the bomb would now have to fight an imperative far older than mankind. It was prevalent in nearly all living things. The will to be born simply could not be denied.

But that didn't mean the force that had taken control of my body wouldn't try. It knew—as did I—that the finishing touches of the bomb were only minutes away. If it could hold on to my body for perhaps fifteen more minutes, the bomb could be triggered.

'More, Kenny, more!' I urged as my body lurched to finish its task. But when I picked up the other part of the core, it was too much for me. Red searing pain shot through the lower half of my body. I moved my arm toward my abdomen. Freda's persona didn't do it: I did!

"Where are we?" Denise cried out, looking about in confusion.

"I don't know," Colleen replied, equally dumbfounded.

Whatever power my interloper had held over them must have been jarred loose by the pain. Did that mean I was in control? I tried to move my mouth. My lips trembled, but I managed to utter one word: "Ambulance..."

While Colleen supported me, Debbie, no longer stunned, shot up the stairs.

It was then that I passed out.

"She's coming around," a woman's voice said somewhere in the blackness.

The world began to reassert itself around me. I could feel myself lying

down—not on the cold, hard concrete of my basement floor, but pressed against a hard mattress. The voice I heard was familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

"My baby..." I managed to mutter. I felt as if I had a wad of cotton in my mouth, though. How long had I been out?

A hand patted mine. "The baby's fine," the voice assured me. "He weighed in at six pounds, eleven ounces. Not bad for a couple of weeks early."

My eyelids felt as if they had weights on them. Only with all the concentration I could muster was I able to pry them open. A smiling woman's face looked down at me, surrounded by long blonde hair.

"Cindy?" I asked, just above a whisper. She nodded. I had known Cindy Patton since shortly after she had come to Ovid and started working for The Judge, but I didn't know her well. What was she doing here?

She must have read the confusion on my face. As if to answer, she stepped aside, letting me see The Judge standing there. "Your Honor, I didn't know about... about..."

My mind was still too dulled by whatever drugs they had given me, but I wanted to tell him that I had no idea that I had built the bomb.

The bomb!

Had anyone told them about the bomb being nearly finished? What had happened after I passed out? "Bomb..." I managed, but it sounded a little more like "bumb" in an old *Pink Panther* movie.

The Judge actually smiled—a rare occurrence in my experience. "The bomb has been disposed of," he told me. "I'll tell you all about it when you're better."

I was in no position to argue. Before I could say another word, I drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

Kenny was there the next time I awakened. He was dozing uncomfortably in a chair at the foot of my bed. From the rumpled

condition of his shirt and the day old growth of beard, I guessed that he had been sitting in that chair for some time.

Daylight was streaming in the window, and as my eyes focused on the scene outside, I could see the big oak trees of Atlas Park basking in the morning sun. Everything outside looked peaceful, normal, and I sighed as I remembered vaguely something The Judge had said about the bomb being “disposed of.”

I felt better than I had upon first awakening—whenever that had been. My mind was clear, and although I was sore from giving birth, it seemed as if the pain wasn’t as bad as it had been after delivering Rachel. I began to realize how resilient the human body—particularly the female human body was. A short time ago, I was lumbering around with a baby in my body, contractions wracking my body so severely that I had lost consciousness. Now, here I was, resting comfortably in bed with only a faint reminder of the discomfort of childbirth.

I looked over at Kenny, realizing how wrong I had been about him. If The Judge had taken me at my word when I first told him about the bomb, Kenny might have been taken from me. And given that I was the sleeper agent and not him, the Ice Queen’s plot might have come to fruition, with Ovid now nothing more than smoking nuclear waste.

I felt suddenly an emptiness—a warning of what life would have been like without Kenny. I had loved Hannah when I had been a man, and while Kenny had no memories of being my wife, whatever composed his soul was still Hannah’s. We were soul mates, I reminded myself, bound together by some force perhaps not even the gods fully understood.

“Martha Lee?” a woman’s voice called softly from the door. I looked over to see a nurse in aqua scrubs. At her side was Rachel, peering up at the bundle the nurse was carrying. The bundle squirmed and managed a tiny little grunt. A tiny little fist ventured over the edge of his blue blanket.

Kenny was suddenly alert, rising to his feet to take our new son gently

from the nurse's arms. Cradling him deftly, he brought him over to my side. "Do you feel like meeting Kenny Junior?" he asked with a proud smile.

My nipples ached instinctively. "Can I feed him?" I asked.

"Do you feel up to it?" the nurse asked.

"Yes."

I opened the front of my gown, allowing a full breast to come free. Taking our son from Kenny, I gently drew the baby to my nipple, watching with a smile as he instinctively moved his lips in preparation for nursing.

I gasped just a little as his mouth latched onto my nipple. The feeling of nursing was not quite pain and not quite pleasure, but an odd merging of the two as he began to draw milk from my body. I smiled at Rachel as she watched me nurse, thinking about how someday, she too, would have a baby and be a mother. She would grow up expecting to do this, as I had not, but we would share the pleasure as only women and mothers could.

Kenny put an arm around Rachel, his other hand touching my arm. "I love you," he said gently. "I love all of you."

"I love you too," I replied softly.

This was the first time all four of us were together, touching as a family. I knew in my heart it was only the first moment of many. Whatever had possessed me was gone now: I could somehow feel that there would be no more tasks attempted for the Ice Queen. Whatever power she had held over me and my friends was gone, destroyed when her mission had failed. Ovid and all her residents—human and godlike—were safe for now.

I prayed silently that it would always be so.

The images of Martha Lee's life faded away, and I found myself staring into the eyes of The Judge seated across the desk from me. I

felt the stirring of others around me, almost as if the gods were awakening just as I was.

“Can we be certain Freya has lost her hold on this woman?” Officer Mercer asked from behind me.

“I detected no presence at this time,” The Judge said thoughtfully. “It would seem that once the baby decided to be born, a conflict between Freya’s immediate orders and Martha Lee’s instinctive female behavior developed. Since the instinct to give birth is one of the strongest we have ever encountered, it was the winner of the conflict, throwing off the conditioning of our former enemy.”

“Former?” I asked.

“Freya is in custody now,” Diana explained. “Of course, as far as Washington is concerned, the Ice Queen has resigned for personal reasons. The announcement is being made about now.”

“What will happen to her?” I asked, thinking to myself that no punishment was bad enough for the woman who had targeted my family and even tried to incinerate Ovid and all of her people. Even the gods would have been destroyed in a nuclear explosion.

“What we have done with her is not your concern,” The Judge said brusquely. “Suffice it to say she will cause us no more trouble. The concern now is to subdue the rest of her ilk who would pitch this world into war and chaos.”

I just nodded. I knew he would tell me nothing more. I had known—as had a fair number of us in Ovid—that the gods sought to prevent a cataclysmic event in our world. Exactly how they would do it was still a mystery though. In any case, it was obvious that there were other gods from other cultures who disagreed with The Judge’s plan and were willing to sacrifice anyone and anything to stop it.

“Thank you for coming in today,” The Judge added, and I knew I was being dismissed.

No one else said a word as I walked out, but Diana followed me out. “You did great!” she assured me in the hall.

“Thanks,” I replied with a sigh. I was a little tired. Usually when I reported on one of The Judge’s cases, I only had to cover a few days. It was very rare when I was required to go back so far and summarize so much. I wouldn’t have even been able to do that if I hadn’t accompanied The Judge to see Martha Lee in the hospital. My ability to chronicle people’s lives was normally limited to those I had seen in the courtroom. Martha Lee had been transformed before I ever got to Ovid, so it was a new and tiring experience for me.

“Diana,” I asked, “I know you can’t tell me everything that’s going on...”

She nodded at that.

“...but could you at least tell me one thing—is this all worth it?”

“Very much so,” she told me seriously. Then, after a pause, she added, “Don’t worry. You’ll get a chance to see that some day.”

“I hope it’s soon,” I murmured. “When my family is endangered, I get very worried.”

She reached up and took my hand. “You’ve become like family to me, so I worry, too. But trust The Judge. He knows what he’s doing, and he knows just what needs to be done.”

I managed a hint of a smile and nodded. “Okay, Diana.”

“Lunch sometime this week?” she asked brightly.

“If you promise to be a little older by then,” I replied, trying to match her cheery tone. “I don’t want to be the only one drinking wine at lunch.”

Her form shifted before my eyes. “How is this?” she asked with a grin. The woman she had become was about average height, no more than thirty with long, dark blonde hair and a femininely athletic figure.

“Great,” I replied, “although looking at you is a terrible reminder that I need to lose about ten pounds.”

“Nonsense,” she laughed, giving me a squeeze. “You look just fine.”

Yeah, but not as good as her. It was amazing how a few years ago, I wouldn't have wanted to be a girl at all, and yet here I was now, dying to look like my goddess friend.

"See you next week," she promised with a wave, heading back into The Judge's chambers.

As I walked to my car, I thought about how much I would have liked to have been invited to the meeting she was attending. The new enemies of Ovid had already tried to blow up just Susan's and my families. Now they had upped the stakes, opting to try for the destruction of the entire community. While I had confidence in The Judge and the rest of the gods, I had worked with them long enough to know that as powerful as they were, they did have their limitations.

For example, I had always assumed that the gods used me to peek into the minds of Ovid's transformees simply because the role of chronicler was beneath them. However, when The Judge had rushed me over to visit Martha Lee while she was still unconscious, I realized how much he needed me.

Since I had not been present at Martha Lee's trial, I had no natural connection to her as I did to the ones whose trials I attended. It seemed to be that attendance that linked them to me. The Judge had been most insistent that I link with Martha Lee though, leading me to believe I was essential to the effort to learn her story.

But the gods—some of them at least—could read minds to varying extents. That much I was sure of. What I gathered they could not do is fully understand us as humans without the amplification of a human mind—my mind. Without my help, their interpretation of Martha Lee's thoughts might not have been enough to tell them the full story—or permit them to say with any assurance that Martha Lee was no longer under the influence of the Ice Queen. I doubted if they could understand the nuances of the human mind without someone like me as an interpreter.

Something I thought of though, as I drove for home and my family, was to question just how Freda Jorgenson had learned that Hannah

and Willis Perry were slated to be sent to Ovid. The Judge, I knew, relied upon the Oracle to predict the deaths of humans destined to be new residents of Ovid, but how had Freda known?

It was possible, I supposed, that our enemies had their own ways of knowing of impending deaths, just as the gods used the Oracle, but there was another possibility as well. It could be that someone in Ovid was telling them—someone in The Judge's own trusted inner circle.

And if there was a spy, I had a pretty good idea who it was...

Ovid XX: The Whiz Kid

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Of all the gods I had come to know in my time in Ovid, there was only one I had come to actively dislike. Some of the gods had practically become friends, and one in particular—Diana—had become one of my best friends. Others were more standoffish, indulging human company but actively avoiding it. Some of them could be brusque while others were merely distant. My own boss—The Judge—could be like that at times, although I gave him a bye since I understood the heavy weight of responsibility perched on his shoulders.

The one I had come to dislike actively though, had become even more of an anathema to me since the recent attempt on the lives of me and my family. There was no doubt in my mind that Aaron March, the Ovidian incarnation of the Roman God of War, was the being responsible for putting my family in jeopardy.

Since the attempt on our lives, I had stewed in silence as The Judge's investigation into the recent security breaches wallowed in futility. I had attempted only once to tell The Judge about the individual I was certain was responsible, but he abruptly stopped me, defending his son to the hilt. Worse yet, he refused to tell me why my family had suddenly become a target for the enemies of Ovid. So not only was I forced to fear for my family's safety, but I had to remain ignorant of what we had done to become targets.

Now though, all of that was about to change, I thought as I pulled into the parking lot at City Hall to begin another day at work. I smiled smugly, knowing that although The Judge still hadn't confided in me, the truth had been delivered to him, and my family would be safer now that the leak was exposed.

I was thankful the shit hadn't hit the fan over the weekend. Since it was a weekday, Jerry was at work, the twins were in school, and Ashley was at day care, so I wouldn't be rushed in my review session

with The Judge and could take all day if necessary. Although things had apparently come to a head the morning before, my services in viewing the memories of a transformee had not been called for. Apparently, The Judge had spent the remainder of the day reviewing what had happened. For all I knew, he might have worked all night, since I suspected the gods never really slept. I was sure he took a long, long time to review what had happened, and I was reasonably certain that today would see the fall of a god.

Even more important than bringing down a god, I was anxious for things to get back to normal. Normal... Even after several years, the term 'normal' still seemed ironic. It was hard for me to imagine the young pre-law Notre Dame student—male student at that—of just a few short years ago ever considering that life in a small Oklahoma town as a woman, a wife, and a mother to three children could ever be considered normal. Now I couldn't imagine it being any other way.

Oh, I suppose to be completely honest, I would sometimes wonder what my life had been if I had remained male—and not been slated to die in a tragic car accident with three of my best friends, which would most surely have happened. By now, I'd be in law school, preparing myself to become an attorney, probably practicing back home in the Midwest. I might even have a serious girlfriend by now, ready to settle down with me and have one of those successful but mundane lives most of us secretly covet.

Instead, though, my life had been filled with excitement and mystery, watching the gods of ancient Rome as they wove together a complex plan to save our world.

"Hi, Cindy!"

I had just walked in the door to City Hall, surprised to see Diana waiting there for me. She was smiling—a good sign since I suspected from her conservative suit and professionally conservative dark hair that she was on official business, and even though she was someone I considered a good friend, the idea of a goddess in a bad mood is not something to be desired.

“You’re up early today,” I commented, accepting a demure hug from her and returning it.

“Oh, it’s not really early for me,” she laughed. “I started the day in Europe, so I’ve been up for hours.”

She was walking with me toward my office, but at the last minute, took my arm, guiding me toward a conference room. “The Judge wants to see you right away,” she explained.

“Something urgent?” I asked with some trepidation. After the assaults on Ovid during the past few weeks, emergency meetings and urgent needs for my services were getting to be all too common. Often, they meant danger for me and my family—or in some cases, for everyone in Ovid. While I knew The Judge would be calling for me today, the fact that other gods were apparently involved meant a major event was about to occur.

“Let’s just say The Judge wants everyone to know this at once.”

As she opened the door to the conference room, I could see that The Judge really meant everyone. Oh, some of the minor players weren’t there, but in addition to Diana and The Judge, Betty Vest—the President of Capta College, Dr. Miner—the Superintendent of Ovid Public Schools, Officer Mercer, Eric Vulman, and Vera March were all seated impatiently twitching in their seats. Surprisingly, Aaron March was there as well, looking more uncomfortable than impatient as he slouched down next to his wife. I had expected him to be in the hands of Mr. Haynes, imprisoned in the crypt beneath the town.

I nodded respectfully to the assembled gods, mindful of the fact that they only congregated in this fashion when something very important was to be brought before them. Decorum must be maintained.

I was shown to an empty seat at the head of the table, which was a clue for me that I would soon be deep in a trance, observing the life of yet another of Ovid’s new residents. I looked down the length of the table, thinking about how the gods looked more like a corporate board of directors instead of Olympus’s finest. I guess it was the modern clothing—business suits and the like—and the high-backed directors’

chairs that gave the impression.

There was still a chair open on my right. I suspected it was being kept for yet another deity when to my surprise, Susan Jager walked in. Officer Mercer promptly escorted her to the empty chair.

“What’s going on?” Susan asked in a whisper.

“I don’t know,” I replied in a whisper of my own. And I didn’t, but I could guess. Ovid had been plagued by breaches in security of late, and it seemed as if the enemies of The Judge had enlisted the help of the US government in an effort to bring the gods’ mysterious plan to a halt. The most recent incursions had nearly cost me and my family our lives, as well as Susan’s family.

I had suspected Aaron March was behind the incursions. While he was supposedly on The Judge’s side, I often found myself wondering what the God of War was doing presumably trying to prevent a major war in the Middle East. It seemed to me that a nice bloody war would be right up his alley. But The Judge trusted him. Now I knew how Harry Potter must have felt when Dumbledore insisted upon trusting Snape.

“Ms. Jager,” The Judge began from his seat at the other end of the table, “I have asked you to join us today since the subject will be important to your family as well as Ms. Patton’s family. I’m speaking, of course, of the recent assaults on Ovid, which I think you will soon see should be coming to a halt. The leaks in our security have been forcefully if somewhat belatedly repaired.” He looked meaningfully at the God of War, his trusted son. I wouldn’t have wanted The Judge to look at me like that.

I didn’t think it was possible, but Aaron March seemed to slide even further into his seat.

“Ms. Patton!” The Judge called out.

“Yes, sir?”

“We would like to review the file of Francis J. Malone.”

I wasn’t surprised at the choice. “Right away, sir,” I replied as I

dropped off into a familiar trance...

From thirty-five thousand feet, everything looks small.

As far as I was concerned though, everything looked pretty small when I was on the ground as well. That's what a few billion dollars will do for you. Everything looks small no matter where you are.

According to the GPS running in the corner of my oversized screen, we were somewhere over Idaho, having just reached our cruising altitude after leaving Sea-Tac the instant the lingering morning fog had cleared. The fog had not been expected to last so long into the morning, so flight schedules were thrown into a tizzy. It meant we were an hour off schedule. We wouldn't reach Miami until nightfall, so for business purposes, we could be delayed a day.

The damned pilot should have insisted we be allowed to take off on time. We had more radar on board than a fucking 767 and he knew it. He should have made sure the tower knew it. Now, we were delayed. I didn't like to be delayed. I made a mental note to fire that idiot pilot as soon as we got back to Seattle. Maybe, if I could find a better pilot in Miami, I'd fire this one's ass before we got back to Seattle. Make him fly commercial back home at his own expense. That would teach him.

"A drink, Mr. Malone?"

I looked up from the screen. Mandy was our flight attendant: she had taken care of me before—and I do mean taken care of me. I looked up at the smiling blonde, standing there perched on three-inch heels in a skirt short enough to be illegal in at least five red states. It was the uniform I required of every flight attendant, and Mandy wore it well. "I drink after sex, Mandy," I reminded her.

She smiled as she set my drink down and began to pull off her blouse.

The couch in my compartment made into a reasonably comfortable bed—mostly for long overnight flights. It was designed for one, but Mandy and I didn't have much trouble making it work for two.

When we were finished, I flipped off the 'Do Not Disturb' sign and was

rewarded with an almost immediate knock on the cabin door. “Mr. Malone?” Lorenzo’s voice called over the roar of the engines. “Do you want the office staff to wait for us in Miami?”

I opened the door as Mandy finished straightening her outfit. As I was wearing nothing but my boxers, it was obvious to Lorenzo what we had been up to. No biggie, though. Lorenzo had seen this scene repeated on many flights and knew how well he was paid to notice nothing untoward. “Of course I want them to stay,” I growled. “If I fire them tonight, I won’t have to pay them to come in tomorrow.”

“But it will be awfully late, sir...” Lorenzo pointed out meekly.

“I don’t remember asking you about the time,” I growled, eyes narrowed.

“Yes, sir.” Lorenzo nervously smoothed the non-existent hair on the top of his head and hustled back to his seat. Wimpy little bastard—queer as a three dollar bill too, as my father used to say. I didn’t know that for a fact, but how could anybody be that wimpy and not be a queer? I’d fire him too, except the little fairy was so damned efficient.

“Send Taylor in here in about ten minutes,” I went on in a tone of obvious dismissal. The ten minutes would give me a chance to get dressed again—not that I wouldn’t have enjoyed meeting Taylor with nothing on but my boxer shorts. “I’ve got a couple of letters I need to review with her.”

“Yes, sir.”

While I waited for Taylor, I took a moment to check myself out in the mirror and get rid of my bed head. A little water splashed on my face and a bit more to smooth down my dark blond hair and I looked moderately presentable. Of course, given who I was, most women who knew of me would have put up with BO and a three-day growth of beard to have a shot at me.

And a lot of women knew who I was. Franklin J Malone—that was me—had been on the cover of just about every business and news magazine in America—and most of the ones overseas as well. Ten

years ago, I had been a college student no one had ever heard of. But now, I was the founder and prime mover of one of the largest software and Internet companies in the world. Five years after the release of my first version of *Be-All*, I was a billionaire several times over and the man credited with bringing down every other high-tech hotshot from Gates to Jobs.

Is it any wonder I considered myself more infallible than the Pope? And I'll bet I got a lot more pussy than the Pope, too.

Thinking back on that hubris now, it seems difficult to understand how I could have been so big-headed, but at the time, that was how I felt. After all, I had designed and brought to market a program that took AI to a new level. All a user had to do was install *Be-All* and every other program he purchased would automatically integrate into a super data base/GUI/operating system/etc. Companies could save so much in integration costs that the ludicrously-high price of *Be-All* seemed extremely reasonable. And since the incremental cost of a new sale was nothing more than the cost of a blank CD and a few bucks in commissions, most of that ludicrously-high price found its way into my net worth.

Mandy smiled on the way out of my cabin. "I'll freshen your drink, Mr. Malone."

"You do that." I smiled back, but it was probably more like a leer than a smile.

I settled back at my desk, lighting a Cuban and reviewing the latest numbers out of Miami. They were uniformly awful. Sales of *Be-All* were down thirty per cent, and all because of *Metamorph*—a knock off of *Be-All*, designed by a little outfit out of Miami. So far, the company had concentrated on Southern states, but a national launch wasn't far off. I had depended upon my Miami office to blunt *Metamorph's* growth, but they had failed me. Now, they'd pay the price.

Of course, I knew that ISAOA, the little company that had developed *Metamorph*, was a special case. Unlike Gates, who had tried and failed to develop a product that could compete with *Be-All*, the leaders

of ISAOA had once been associated with me. When they left, they knew almost as much about *Be-All* as I did. After all, I was the one who taught them. They knew how to compete against our product, and they had applied their knowledge well.

Of course, we had sued them. But there were problems we hadn't been able to overcome. Software suits can take years to resolve—look at Blackberry. Add to that the fact that the company was offshore in a country less than friendly to US interests, and the fact that much of the money behind ISAOA had come from organized crime, and it spelled Big Problems.

The Miami office had been working with a team of high-priced lawyers to figure a way to blunt *Metamorph*'s advancing market share with subtle threats of potential intellectual rights issues with the new product while our home office legal staff tried to figure a way to sue ISAOA out of business. It hadn't worked, though. Now we'd have to start all over in Miami.

There was a knock at my cabin door.

"Come in," I called out with an odd anticipation in my voice. Why was I always as nervous as a schoolboy when she came into my presence? I suppose in a way I wanted her but knew I couldn't have her—she had made that perfectly clear. If she had been anyone else, I would have fired her, but not Wanda.

Wanda Taylor walked into my cabin, swivelling a little awkwardly as she did. She looked a little embarrassed to be wearing heels so high and a skirt so short—not to mention a top so tight that it looked as if her breasts were going to burst through it. God, I wanted her right then and there. I know, I know, I had just bedded Mandy, but Mandy was an easy lay. Wanda had rebuffed my every advance, causing me to want her all the more. I knew Wanda hated what I made her wear, but she was paid far too well to afford the luxury of telling me to stick it where the sun don't shine. She made no secret from the way she carried herself that she hated the dress code I had imposed on all of the women in the company—skirts, heels, the works, and the tighter the better. Even though I couldn't have her, I enjoyed watching her

squirm in her sexy outfit.

She pushed a long blonde lock out of her face. “You wanted to review some letters?” That was Wanda—all business all the time.

I didn’t answer her right away. Instead, I looked her over, up and down, causing her to blush. I made no overt advances, though. I didn’t dare. She was probably just waiting for me to do something stupid so she could sue the pants off me. That wasn’t going to happen, though. I was way too smart for that. Even the dress code was worded in such a way that the women in my company couldn’t find enough to sue me over. A couple had tried, and they had lost.

I had hired Wanda from the smoking ruins of Microsoft. She had been Bill Gates’ personal assistant, so she was valuable when it came to integrating the remaining parts of Microsoft into *Malone Enterprises*. She didn’t like working for me, but for what I was paying her, she could lump it—just like she could lump the company dress code.

“Yes, I do,” I finally told her. I picked up another report from the edge of my desk. I waved it in front of her nose. “What’s this all about?”

To my annoyance, she didn’t seem at all perturbed. “It’s the satellite coverage test you commissioned,” she said calmly. “Don’t you remember?” There was a condescending tone to her question.

“Of course I remember!” I shot back. “What I want to know is what is R&D doing to overcome the deficiencies?”

“Deficiencies, Mr. Malone?”

“You heard me,” I told her, opening the report. “If *Be-All Sat* is going to work, we need to make sure we have strong coverage over the entire globe. Look at this report. The test signals indicate several parts of the world where signals aren’t clear. And look at this—there are dead spots with no coverage at all.”

“Just two spots,” she argued. “One is in rural Oklahoma and the other is in Syria a few miles outside Damascus. Those are hardly worth worrying about. They aren’t exactly prime markets for *Be-All Sat*.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” I reminded her sternly. “According to the

report, our vaunted engineers can't explain why those dead spots are there. Before we deploy the network, we need to know what is causing these dead spots. Otherwise, we may find other dead spots as we deploy the product."

"I'll get our team on it right away," she said calmly.

"You'd better," I snapped.

As she left, I was downright furious, but more at her than our engineers. I both hated and admired the way she stood up to me, and I was pissed at myself for being so ambivalent. Part of her problem was that she knew she was practically indispensable. Give her a task and it got done, but her unflappable attitude grated on me.

In effect, she was right. *Be-All Sat* was scheduled for kickoff in two more weeks, and the fact that it couldn't be used in two minor parts of the world was not, in itself, all that important. The problem was that no one could figure out why those dead spots existed. Teams had been sent into both area and found nothing that would cause the problem.

Be-All Sat was the next step in the growth of the company. The in-house product had reached its limits, and only a more powerful version in contact with the more sophisticated AI on our internal system could hope to take the product to the next level. In addition, our corporate intelligence told us *Metamorph's* satellite delivery was at least two years away. They hadn't even launched and tested their birds yet. This could be our chance to put them away without depending upon the vagaries of the courtroom. But if those dead spots proved to be random, or more pervasive than we had imagined, *Be-All* could crash at any time, any place—and that would be disastrous.

Next on my schedule was to call New York on an acquisition opportunity my agents were working on. I was just about to make the call when the plane lurched suddenly.

Now, I want it understood that I am not as a rule a nervous flyer, but I would challenge anyone not to feel their stomach dropping to the floor when the plane they are riding in shudders and jumps violently. Instead of New York, I called the pilot.

“What the hell is going on up there?”

“We... we aren’t sure, sir,” came the uncomfortable answer.

That didn’t sound good at all. I wasn’t about to leave things at that.

“I’m coming up there,” I snapped.

It seemed as if I had to take care of everything, I grumbled silently as I made my way up past the seats where Lorenzo and Wanda were working. Fortunately, I was a pretty good pilot in my own right. I knew just what questions to ask that incompetent pilot of mine. I had made up my mind. Once we were in Miami, my pilot would be looking for work, and his co-pilot with him.

I barged into the cockpit to a scene of chaos. The pilot and co-pilot were engaged in an argument while the pilot was nervously fiddling with the automatic pilot and the co-pilot was twisting the radio dial through multiple frequencies.

“What the fuck is wrong up here?” I yelled over their squabbling.

“Can’t you two figure out how to fly the plane?”

“It’s the autopilot, sir!” the pilot told me. From the sound of his voice, the problem was more than just a hiccup in the autopilot.

“What’s the problem?”

“It was engaged and doing fine until a few minutes ago,” the pilot explained. “Then suddenly, it shut itself off. I’m trying to re-engage it... there!”

The plane seemed to reset itself in trim, and the rough ride we had been experiencing smoothed out.

“I still can’t raise anyone on the radio,” the co-pilot called out.

“It’s okay,” the pilot responded. “The autopilot is back on... what’s this?”

“What’s what?” I demanded.

The pilot was obviously puzzled, looking at the LED displays above the autopilot. “This isn’t the course I set in.”

“Then turn the fucking thing off and start over,” I demanded.

He did as he was ordered, but nothing changed. “It’s still set on another course,” he said incredulously.

“So what course is it set on?” I asked.

“That’s not our big worry right now,” he told me. “The problem is that the software on this plane is designed to guide the plane portal to portal. We normally don’t use it to actually land the plane. A 737 can be a little touchy to land automatically. But if we can’t turn it off, this plane will land wherever the current setting is taking it.”

“So?”

“So what if that ‘somewhere’ doesn’t have a long enough runway to accommodate the plane?”

I felt my heart jump. “It won’t allow that, will it?” Surely no one would be stupid enough to allow software on board which would cause the plane to land somewhere with too small a runway, would it?

The pilot shook his head. “Normally, no, but according to the documentation, the destination code isn’t valid. We don’t know where we’re going. This all just happened when I was re-setting the system to take us up another two thousand feet to avoid some weather.”

“So this is your fault,” I said. It wasn’t a question.

He shook his head again. “I just don’t know. Now Carson,” he nodded toward his co-pilot, “can’t raise ATC on the radio, so we’re flying blind and deaf.”

“Bill, look at this,” Carson called out to the pilot. He was pointing to the autopilot.

“What is it?”

“The autopilot is turned off.”

I looked at the meaningless LED display. “Are you out of your fucking mind?” I practically yelled. “Of course it’s on. Look at the LED.”

“Yes, sir,” the co-pilot replied, obviously trying to hold his temper

under stress. “The display is on but the unit is off.”

Rather than argue, the pilot flipped the switch to the ‘on’ position. The LED display remained unchanged. “What the hell...”

“Look,” I snapped at the pilot, “quit screwing with that. Disconnect it if you have to, but get us safely on the ground.” With that, I stormed out of the cockpit.

Wanda and Lorenzo both looked concerned, but it was Wanda who had the balls to address me. Lorenzo just sat there trembling like a little schoolgirl.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“Those two aren’t competent to handle a balsa wood glider,” I told her. I suppose I should have been panicked, too, but I was too pissed to be scared. Besides, I was Franklin J. Malone and I was invincible. Maybe I was just being too dense to think about the consequences of the malfunction on board, or maybe I was just too wrapped up in the thought that this was going to delay me from getting to the staff in Miami early enough to fire them. Whatever the reason—or reasons—all I could do was fume.

I had to take my ire out on someone. I spotted Mandy sitting in the back of the cabin. Her face was white with fear. I glared at her. “What the hell are you doing sitting on your ass. Get me a drink, damn it!”

She was so used to following my orders that she jumped to her feet and dutifully slipped behind the bar. The clink of ice in my glass felt somehow calming, as if such a normal activity as fixing me a drink made things seem normal.

It was Lorenzo’s turn now. I turned to face him. He winced, as if I were going to hit him. “Quit acting like a little girl,” I growled at him. “Show some balls. Get Miami on the line for me and tell them we’re delayed, but I want them in the office at seven—no make that six in the morning.”

“Six?”

“You have a hearing problem, Lorenzo?”

“Yes, sir!”

As if to emphasize my point the plane lurched. I hadn’t been expecting it and hadn’t braced for it, so I toppled over, cracking my knee on the side of one of the seats.

“Now what the hell is going on?” I roared.

Back in the cabin, confusion reigned. Although the plane seemed to be making a controlled descent, I knew the minute I opened the cockpit door that the crew had completely lost control of the aircraft. Both the pilot and the co-pilot were frantically flipping switches and turning knobs, but nothing seemed to have any effect.

“Where are we?” I demanded.

“Dropping through twenty-five thousand feet over central Kansas,” the pilot replied without turning toward me. His face was white—it didn’t exactly instill any confidence.

“Can you shut everything down and restart?” I asked more calmly than I felt.

“We’ve tried,” he replied. “Nothing seems to have any effect.”

“Have you issued a distress call?”

“We still don’t have any communications either. Now how about going back to your seat and let us handle this?”

“You haven’t been handling it very well,” I grumbled, but I did what he asked—or at least I went back to the main cabin. To be honest, I was as frightened as anyone else on board, but I hadn’t gotten where I had in the business world by showing any weaknesses. I might be frightened, but no one would know. If we crashed and died, no one would be around to know how terrified I was, but if we survived, I didn’t want some little pansy like Lorenzo blabbing that I had been scared enough to practically piss in my pants.

While Lorenzo looked as if he was about to scream for his mommy, Taylor was matching my stoicism. I begrudgingly and silently gave her credit. She seemed to have more balls than most of the men on

board. I was glad, really. Her demeanor forced me to put on the brave act. Without her fortitude, I would have had no one around to compare my own reactions to.

I tried to think of something else—anything else as the plane droned on through unknown skies. As I buckled in, I could see we were entering a bank of clouds at what I estimated to be about fifteen thousand feet. Wherever we were going, we'd be there shortly.

Maybe this was like that last few seconds of your life where you supposedly see your whole life flash before you, I thought. I hoped not. Most of my early life was not all that pleasant and better off forgotten. Rather than remembering the pudgy, shy little boy I had been— orphaned at twelve by a nasty car accident and raised by an uncaring aunt and uncle until I had been old enough to get away to college—it was better to dwell on the me who took to computer programming in college and quickly and ruthlessly developed that skill until the world was nearly mine for the taking.

Strangely enough, neither of my selves rose to mind. Instead, I had something of an epiphany dropping down through the clouds to an unknown fate. I began to realize that if I died, there would be no one to mourn my passing. My aunt and uncle would not care—other than the forlorn hope that they might be able to achieve through my death a portion of my wealth I had purposefully denied them in life. There was no wife or any children to mourn my passing, and as for any of my business associates, my death might produce more opportunities than problems. Sure, the stock in *Malone Enterprises* would drop in price, but it would recover, so even my stockholders would have no long-term reason to mourn my passing. The only reminder of my existence would probably be an oil painting of me in the boardroom over the caption of 'Our Founder.'

For a man who had often seen himself as invincible, it was a sobering thought.

As we broke through the clouds, I could see below a common Midwestern landscape—green fields lined up neatly with a monotonous grid of farm roads stretching out nearly to the horizon. I could make

out hills in the distance—two nearly-identical groupings of them sheltering a valley in between. No, I realized as I looked at the two clusters of hills, they weren't 'nearly identical.' Instead, they were absolutely identical, as if someone had cloned one set and moved it a few miles away.

As the plane approached the entrance to the valley, it banked sharply, giving me hope that the pilot had regained control of the aircraft. "Do you have control of the plane?" I asked brusquely through the intercom at my seat.

"Negative," the pilot replied, exposing his military background with that response. "The plane seems to be flying itself, but it's not doing it right. The engines are idling and none of the ailerons are in play. By all rights, we should be tumbling out of the sky right now."

I didn't bother to respond, but if I had, I would have reminded him that it was for the best that we weren't reacting as he thought we should be.

The cabin had become strangely calm. I think all of us were just thankful that whoever—or whatever—was flying the plane was doing it in a way that seemed best for our survival. Lorenzo was calmer than I had ever seen him before, and Taylor seemed her normal distant self. As for Mandy, she had been whimpering moments before, but now the whimpering had stopped. I swivelled around far enough to note that she too, sat calmly, her hands together as she watched the ground slowly rising in her view.

We were passing over a town. It didn't look to be very large—no more than ten thousand or so, I estimated. I could only hope that its airport possessed a runway long enough to land on safely. Then I realized I had no real evidence that it was landing at an airport at all. Still, the ride was so smooth and so controlled that I felt there had to be a runway coming up.

The pilot confirmed it. "Folks, buckle up for landing. I don't know how, but we're lined up with a runway right now and should be safely on the ground in a couple of minutes."

Good to his word, I felt the gear drop, and moments later, the wheels touched down on a smooth surface. I was alarmed for a second as I didn't hear the roar of the engines being reversed to reduce our speed, but for whatever reason, the plane slowed of its own accord, neatly pulling off onto a taxiway and coming to a stop in front of a nearby hangar.

I jumped to my feet the moment we stopped and rushed into the cockpit. "Where the hell are we?" I asked hurriedly as I peered out onto the tarmac.

"We don't know," the pilot admitted, perusing a chart. "All we know for certain is we're somewhere in Eastern Oklahoma. The GPS crapped out right after we crossed the state line. We must be somewhere near Muskogee, but the airport—hell, even the town—don't show up on the charts."

"We're in Ovid, Oklahoma," the co-pilot called out.

We both looked at him in surprise. "How the hell do you know that?" I demanded.

The co-pilot pointed out beyond the nose of our aircraft. "Because that's what it says on the side of that police car."

I did a double take. I had just looked out on the tarmac and seen nothing. Now, there was a police car sitting there, and an officer wearing those stupid mirrored sunglasses was standing beside it, as if he had been waiting for us for hours.

"He wasn't there a moment ago..." my voice trailed off.

"Well, he's there now," the pilot replied drolly as he unstrapped himself and headed back into the cabin—to open the hatch as it turned out.

Everyone else in the main cabin was still belted in place, as if unsure as to if the plane was going to miraculously decide to fly back up into the sky. However, as the pilot opened the hatch, each of them reluctantly released their belts and followed the pilot and me down the stairs that had already been placed in front of the hatch—by whom I had no idea.

The police officer just stood there with his arms folded until the co-pilot—the last man on board—stepped off the plane. Then he moseyed over to stand in front of us, an officious expression on his face.

“Good aftern...” I began, but he cut me off with, “Don’t you know it’s illegal to bring explosives into Ovid?”

“Explosives?” I repeated, confused. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Without a word, he walked over to the plane, opening a baggage hatch (although how he managed it without the proper tools didn’t seem to matter to us at the time). From just within the compartment, he pulled a small but heavy-looking trunk. Opening it (again with no discernible key, we all stared dumbfounded as we looked at half a dozen large gray bricks, each with a wire leading to a small electronic device.

“This is an altimeter,” the police officer explained drolly. “It’s set to trigger these explosives at thirty-seven thousand feet...”

I did a little quick math in my head. We had been cruising at thirty-five thousand feet as I remembered. The pilot had mentioned something about getting ready to go up another two thousand feet when he lost control of the plane. If he had succeeded in doing so, we’d probably be nothing but debris scattered from the Rockies to the Nebraska panhandle.

“But how could you know about those explosives?” the pilot asked.

“You apparently have some powerful enemies, Mr. Malone,” the police officer commented. Was I the only one who noticed that he really hadn’t answered the question?

But yes, apparently I did have powerful enemies, I admitted to myself, and I was pretty sure as to who they were. *Metamorph* had been financed by organized crime: we had all known that. What we hadn’t known is how far they would go to eliminate me rather than face the upcoming legal battle they were sure to lose.

And I thought I was ruthless...

“I’m going to have to place you all under arrest,” the officer announced suddenly.

I looked up at him, trying to see if there was a hint of a smile or a twinkle in his eyes hidden by the reflective shades. “You’re joking, aren’t you? If so, it’s not funny.”

“I’m not trying to be funny,” he replied laconically. “It’s illegal to bring explosive devices into the city of Ovid.”

As he spoke, a second police car pulled up beside the first one, and an attractive female officer emerged from the vehicle. She was black (okay already... African-American—happy now?) and wore an outfit identical to the other officer. I couldn’t help but wonder why any woman who looked like her would want to dress like a man. But I had more important questions right now.

“How the hell can you accuse us of bringing explosives into your pissant town? Don’t you realize someone else put them there to kill us?”

The officer remained steadfast. “That’s true, but you did transport them here, knowingly or not.”

“This is a fucking outrage!” I yelled. It didn’t impress the officer, though.

“Sir, one more outburst and I’ll have to add resisting arrest.”

“Fine!” I fumed. “Okay, I get it. This is a small town shakedown. Okay, take me to your judge or whatever. I’ll pay whatever fines it takes to get us out of here. But when I get to Miami, I’m going to stick so many lawyers up your town’s ass it won’t be able to shit for a month.”

Oh yes, I was so diplomatic in those days, wasn’t I?

In my own defense, though—if it could be called a defense—the charges were ludicrous, and I was a man who was rich and powerful enough that I generally got my way. So forgive me if I went a little over the top, but keep in mind it usually got the results I was looking for.

I might as well have said nothing, though. Neither officer changed

expressions: it was as if they hadn't even heard what I was saying. With one final dramatic sigh, I allowed myself to be escorted to the back seat of the police car.

The crew got into the back seat of the woman officer's car to my disappointment. I climbed into the back seat of the other car, followed by Taylor and Lorenzo. Although the back seat was relatively spacious, I could feel Taylor's hip up against mine and thought about what a nice hip it was. At least I was able to sidle up against her without fear of a sexual harassment suit, but that was the only good thing to happen all day.

Oops, not true. Screwing Mandy had been fun too, but it was all really downhill after that.

Having nothing better to do, I looked around at the town of Ovid coming up around us as we got away from the airport. I had to admit that as small towns go, it didn't look too bad. I was born in the city—if you could call Tacoma a city. Compared to nearby Seattle, Tacoma was an economic basket case, and I had grown up until my parents died in one the poorer parts of town—a part of town that looked like it could do with a new coat of paint just to bring it up to the dilapidated level. From what I knew of small Midwestern towns, Ovid should be similarly run down as agricultural jobs dried up and small manufacturers moved their facilities to Third World nations where workers demanded even less than small town folks.

Instead of a dying farm town, Ovid looked unusually prosperous. Nothing was exactly spectacular, but the streets were clean, the buildings in good repair, and the stores well stocked. There were even new buildings—a rare sight in small, isolated towns in the Midwest.

"Look!" Taylor called out, leaning over me.

"Look at what?" I asked, annoyed.

"That woman... oh damn! She just went into that store."

"So?"

Taylor looked a little chagrined. "Well, she looked... I don't know..."

transparent? No, that's not right. But it was as if I could almost see through her."

"Yeah, right," I mumbled, folding my arms and closing my eyes. Taylor seemed to be losing it, and I didn't want to listen to any of her ramblings. Instead, I wanted to figure out just how much this hick town judge was probably going to soak us for so we could get the hell out of town and off to Miami.

I wondered if this small town cop—what did his nametag say? Oh yeah, this Mercer had any idea who I was. I hoped not. If he or whatever judge we drew had any idea who they were dealing with, they might decide they had hit the mother lode and shake me down big time. And they were bound to find out when we were arraigned. I put a mental price tag of ten grand on the whole affair. That wasn't much to me, but it was probably more than this cop and his pet judge got for shaking down out-of-town speeders in several months. I'd offer him five grand up front and let him bump me up to ten. No problem.

"You're right!" Lorenzo said to Taylor. "I see it, too. Look at that woman with that little girl."

"Yeah, the little girl looks normal, but the mother is nearly transparent. Mr. Malone, look!"

Against my better judgment, I opened my eyes and looked where she was pointing. Come to think of it, the woman did look a little funny, but I figured it was just the power of suggestion. I didn't really get a good look at her anyhow. I just grunted and leaned back in my seat.

It didn't take us long to get to our destination. The Ovid City Hall was about what I expected—maybe a little nicer but no biggie. We piled out of the two police cars and followed the officers into a surprisingly well-appointed courtroom. I figured if they trumped up charges on everyone else like they had on us, they probably had plenty of money to make the courtrooms look spiffy.

The woman police officer left us at the door while the Mercer guy ushered us up to the defendant's table. The only others in the courtroom were an attractive blonde who was sitting by herself in the

gallery and a pretty brunette who was waiting for us at the defense table.

The brunette rose as we approached, offering a faint smile. “Hi, I’m Susan Jager, and I’ll be your attorney this afternoon.”

“Look, sister,” I growled, “I don’t need any hick town-appointed attorney. If I needed someone, I’ve got a dozen lawyers on retainer who spend a great deal of their time sitting on their asses figuring out new ways to bill me. Now just tell me how much of a fine this is going to be, I’ll pay it, and you guys can go back to nailing unsuspecting speeders.”

Her smile became more artificial as she shot me a look that said she didn’t like me one little bit. Well, the feeling was mutual. “I recognize you, Mr. Malone, but don’t think you’re going to intimidate the... people who run Ovid. Better men than you have failed to do that.”

“I’m so scared,” I mocked.

It was as if Yoda had suddenly been changed into an attractive brunette. “You will be,” she promised, her eyes narrowing.

I’ve never been one for premonitions, but the way she said it, I almost believed her—not for any logical reason, but just because she looked and sounded as if she had meant it. It wasn’t so much that it was a threat, but rather as if she knew from personal knowledge what was about to happen to us. I found out later that she did, but as I said, that was later—much too late to matter.

“Just what is going on here?” Taylor broke in. It was ironic, I thought, she was a woman and yet the only one in our group with enough guts to try to upstage me. If I could just get her to go to bed with me, she would be my idea of the perfect woman.

The Jager woman’s visage softened. “In a few minutes, The Judge will be out here to try your case. All I can say now is that your sentences will be rather... unique. Your best strategy is to be open and honest, remain respectful, and remember that what is about to happen to you is not so bad. But whatever you say or do, try not to annoy him.”

Well that was cryptic.

“We didn’t even know there were explosives on board,” the pilot broke in. “How could we? We were almost killed by them. We’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I believe you,” our attorney assured him.

“All rise!” the Mercer guy intoned. “Municipal Court of Ovid, Oklahoma, is now in session, The Honorable Judge presiding.”

‘Judge who?’ I wondered.

I expected some hick of a country magistrate to saunter into the courtroom in a rumpled suit with tie askew. What I saw instead, was a judge who looked intelligent and confident enough in his neatly-pressed black robe to make a Supreme Court Justice feel inadequate. He appeared fairly tall—a little over six feet anyway—with medium brown hair and a neatly-trimmed beard, each of which was showing only enough signs of gray to make him look more distinguished. He wore gold-framed glasses which did little to hide piercing blue eyes. As we all rose to our feet, I couldn’t help but wonder what a magistrate like him was doing stuck in a small town.

“Be seated!” he said—no that’s not right. He commanded. Once he was seated, he looked to the police officer who was now acting as bailiff. “What have we here?” The question appeared to be nothing more than a formality, since I suspected he knew exactly who we were.

The Mercer guy handed him a thin folder which he studied for a moment. Then, he addressed the court: “William Rose, Carson Baxter, and Amanda Hollingsworth!”

Our flight crew nervously got to their feet. Funny, I thought to myself, they were my regular crew and yet I hadn’t even remembered their last names.

Our attorney rose with them. “Your Honor...” she began, but The Judge cut her off. “You’ll have time to present your case, Ms. Jager,” he admonished her.

Turning his attention to our flight crew, he said, “You’ve been accused

of bringing an explosive device into Ovid. How do you plead?”

“Your Honor,” my pilot suddenly interjected, “how can we be guilty of bringing explosives into your town if we didn’t even know they were on board?”

The Judge leaned forward. “I didn’t ask if you brought them in knowingly,” he replied. “In fact, I know the explosives were placed there by one of the ground crew members at the orders of an organized crime boss who was funding the development of a product which would be in competition with *Be-All*.”

Exactly what I thought. I rose to my feet, “Your Honor, how could you know this?”

“Sit down, Mr. Malone!” he demanded. Even though I didn’t want to, I fell back into my seat. “Your turn will come soon enough. Ms. Jager, haven’t you warned your clients about the inadvisability of making outbursts in my courtroom?”

“Not exactly, Your Honor,” she replied, although she didn’t seem to be especially chastened by The Judge’s admonishment.

“Then I’ll do it for you,” he said ominously. “Now, Mr. Rose, did you or did you not bring explosives into Ovid?”

“Well, I suppose I did...”

“Good,” The Judge nodded. “Then that’s settled.”

It was a farce, of course—a travesty of justice, almost as if the entire purpose of the trial had nothing to do with the charges. I began to have the uncomfortable feeling that in Ovid, the inmates were running the asylum. If this ridiculous trial was being performed merely to precipitate a shakedown, it was way over the top.

“Now you may present your defense, Ms. Jager,” The Judge said magnanimously.

“I would point out that no one on board the plane knew of the presence of explosives...”

“Noted.”

“...and ask for a dismissal of all charges.”

“Request denied,” The Judge replied perfunctorily.

If I thought what had happened thus far made no sense, what happened next seemed even more incredible. It started when The Judge began muttering something that sounded like Latin. I don't know if it was really Latin or not, but it sounded like snatches of Latin I had heard from time to time. As he spoke, the courtroom began to feel... funny. It's hard to describe, but it was as if a TV picture were to go slightly out of phase. The activity was centered on the flight crew.

Even though I watched it happen, it was almost too unbelievable for my mind to accept what my eyes were seeing. The two men in the flight crew seemed to grow shorter, the dark pants and white shirts of their uniforms rippling and changing as I watched. As for Mandy, the flight attendant I had been in bed with only a few hours before, she too became shorter and her skin and hair began to darken. I looked into their eyes as their expressions changed from confusion to outright panic. The two men then looked at each other in alarm as they watched small breasts budding out from their transformed clothing. The pilot's receding brown hair had become long and blonde, while the co-pilot's hair turned dark red. Both men were now girls of perhaps sixteen or so, wearing tiny denim shorts and pastel t-shirts. Mandy was of a similar age and attire, but her skin was now a chocolate brown. None of the 'girls' still exhibited panicked visages. Each girl now looked giddy with anticipation, and I could hear them giggling as The Judge addressed them.

“So who will be driving you all out to Sunset Beach?” he asked in a friendly tone, as if in the middle of a mundane conversation with the three girls.

“Brad Henry and two of his friends,” the blonde giggled, the other girls joining her in a chorus of giggles.

“Yeah,” the redhead chimed in. “I just had to come by and get some money from mom so that, you know, we could get a pizza or something later.”

“Maybe we won’t have to,” the African-American girl broke in. “Maybe the boys will buy one for us.”

That set off yet another irritating chorus of giggles.

It didn’t take me very long to figure out that the three crewmembers had no idea that they had ever been anything else other than what they were now. It took an even shorter period of time to realize that we were probably next... unless I could figure out something to prevent it.

All thoughts of a paltry bribe of a few thousand dollars fled from my mind. Anyone who could do what this guy could do was looking for the big bucks. It was obvious he knew who we were. The incredible transformation of my crew had been a warning to me that he meant business. I mentally added a couple of zeroes to the amount I would have to pay.

“Now, Mr. Malone,” The Judge said, turning away from the departing schoolgirls and back toward the three of us who remained in jeopardy, “the preliminaries are out of the way and we can move on to more important matters.”

I did my best not to cringe. I expected another Latin chant, followed by my own transformation. Was I to become a young teenaged girl with no memories of having ever been anything else? The thought was as worrisome as speculation about my own death would have been.

“Your Honor!” our attorney interjected. “If you have determined that the flight crew was responsible for transporting the explosives into Ovid...” ‘A real reach there,’ I thought to myself, but I admired her for the effort, “...then how can you also hold these three people to blame as well?”

“She’s right,” Taylor chimed in. “We knew nothing about the explosives. For that matter, neither did the flight crew. Think about it, Your Honor, we would have all died up there. We’re the victims in this case.”

Just to make it more interesting, Lorenzo spoke next, but he was looking at me. “We knew nothing about the explosives. If you have to

blame someone, make it Mr. Malone. He's the one who exposed us to all of this by crossing the mob!"

"I never crossed the mob!" I snarled. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"The mob financed your company from the beginning," he insisted. "You crossed them when you issued that new stock and diluted their investment. That's why they set up *Metamorph* to compete against you!"

He was right, of course, but I wasn't about to admit it—especially in a courtroom. But I had fooled the mob. I planned to sue *Metamorph* and I was probably going to win, taking them down along with a shitload of mob money. My only miscalculation had been underestimating how violently they were willing to respond. Publicly though, I had no other option rather than to deny it. "You're crazy," I scoffed. "There was no mob money in my company."

"Oh, but there was," The Judge broke in. "Would you like the exact numbers, Mr. Malone?" He held a sheet of paper up for me to see. While I couldn't see what was written on the paper, I had the uncomfortable feeling that he was telling me the truth.

"This is a sham," I grumbled, sitting down and folding my arms. I was so upset at the revelations that I had momentarily forgotten the awesome power The Judge had demonstrated. In all honesty, I had no idea the mob had invested in my company, presumably with laundered money. Could it be that I had inadvertently triggered the entire chain of events that led to the founding of *Metamorph*? If so, some of my financial advisers would have some serious explaining to do, assuming I was able to get back to Seattle. To be honest, that was not looking like a very good possibility at the moment.

The Judge turned away from me and looked at Lorenzo with piercing blue eyes. "I hope you don't think your accusation gets you off the hook, Mr. Lorenzo." As my associate trembled, The Judge pulled another sheet of paper out of the file. He smiled. "By the way, did you know, Mr. Lorenzo, that nearly everyone thinks you're gay?"

“You’re not?” I blurted out.

Lorenzo shook his head, looking almost ashamed. I supposed I couldn’t blame him. He acted like such a helpless little wimp that everyone naturally assumed he was gay.

Then, The Judge unveiled the next surprise. “While you, on the other hand, really are gay, aren’t you, Ms. Taylor?”

Taylor glared at him. “Yes, I am. So what?” There was no hesitation in her voice.

I looked at her in shock. Here I had been trying so hard to get her into bed and she was a muff diver? Shit!

“So it seems,” The Judge sighed dramatically, returning to the case, “that in addition to the explosives charges, there are some potentially large criminal charges involving your company at issue, Mr. Malone.”

“That’s not your jurisdiction,” I pointed out without really thinking that someone with the Judge’s strange powers would be intimidated by a little jurisdiction problem. But I had to use the meagre weapons at my disposal. I wasn’t exactly in a position to fight it out with this guy by flinging lightning bolts at him, although I had a funny feeling he could do that to me if he chose to.

“Mr. Malone,” The Judge began, “there are so many charges I could level against you that I scarcely know where to start.”

“Your Honor...” our attorney began again.

“Yes, Ms. Jager,” The Judge broke in with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I’m well aware that I put you in the role of defense counsel to stifle, shall we say, my over-exuberance, but I think you have to admit that Mr. Malone is not worth your sympathy.”

“There may be extenuating circumstances,” she pointed out.

“Wait a minute!” I chimed in. “I’m right here. If you’ve got a problem with what I’ve done, talk to me. All I’ve done is go from being an underprivileged child to one of the wealthiest men in the world by developing something everyone wanted and selling it to them at a

reasonable price. What the hell more do you want from me?"

The Judge leaned forward, and I didn't like the look on his face. I had the sudden disturbing thought that with a look like that, I'd be lucky if all he did was change me into a little giggling teenage girl.

"Mr. Malone," he began, "I am well aware that your early life was rather hard. I'm also aware that you worked hard, used your incredible programming skills and showed impressive business acumen to get where you are today. Unfortunately, along the way, you lost something in spite of all you gained."

"And what's that?" I asked sarcastically.

"Your humanity, Mr. Malone," The Judge replied quietly.

"Then can we go?" Lorenzo asked nervously. "You've got Malone, so you don't really need us."

"Your lack of loyalty disturbs me," The Judge said dangerously, causing Lorenzo to shrink back.

"Loyalty?" Lorenzo repeated, his voice rising nearly an octave. As frightened as he was, he seemed to feel the need to defend himself. "Why should I be loyal to someone who used me as his whipping boy? How would you like to be called a pussy to your face, Your Honor? I was—plenty of times."

"This is getting us nowhere," The Judge said to no one in particular.

"You, Mr. Lorenzo and you, Ms. Taylor, are accomplices to Mr. Malone—wittingly or not. It's time for your sentencing so we can get to more pressing matters."

I gulped. That meant I was a 'pressing matter,' didn't it?

The Latin chanting began again, and I expected to see Lorenzo and Taylor treated in a manner similar to our flight crew. Imagine my surprise when both of them began to grow larger. Lorenzo's hair got fuller and his face took on a more rugged shape. He grew at least six inches to an imposing height as his muscles became more defined and his suit coat became a short-sleeved blue chambray work shirt while his suit pants became jeans. His receding hairline was

disappearing as new, shorter hair spread over his scalp.

Taylor, too, was growing and becoming more masculine as I watched in alarm. Unlike Lorenzo though, her clothing remained more businesslike although nonetheless masculine. Her short skirt had become a pair of tan slacks and her blouse was now a men's striped dress shirt. A dark neatly-trimmed beard spread over her face and her eyebrows became thicker. She watched with surprise as the front of her slacks tented out a bit, and I realized suddenly that 'she' was no longer the proper pronoun to describe his identity.

"I... I still have my memories," Lorenzo said slowly. "I remember who I was." He looked down at his large chest and examined his broad hands. "But... who am I now?"

"You are Bill O'Hara," The Judge told him. "You own O'Hara's Tire Market out on the highway."

"But I don't know anything about tires." Lorenzo's uncertain inflections were still there, but the deep voice practically rumbled in the courtroom. Lorenzo had changed from an underdeveloped runt of a man into someone who looked as if he could break boulders with his bare hands.

"You'll learn," The Judge returned offhandedly. "Now, you'll find your service truck in the parking lot. Please move on so that we can deal with the rest of today's business."

The big man shook his head. "I'd like to wait around to see what you do with him." He pointed a meaty finger at me.

"That is none of your affair, Mr. O'Hara," The Judge told him. The tone of his voice did not seem to brook any argument, but the new Lorenzo was not smart enough to be deterred.

"He treated me like shit for years," Lorenzo—now O'Hara—argued. "I want to see what you do to him."

Taylor bravely stepped in front of the larger man. "Look, we'll find out later, okay? Don't piss this Judge off or you might find yourself back in diapers."

“Well put, Mr. Garcia,” The Judge called out with a menacing grin. “Unless Mr. O’Hara leaves right now, he may very well find himself less capable of such inappropriate aggression. Do I make myself clear, Mr. O’Hara?”

“Yeah,” he replied, running a beefy hand through the short red stubble which now covered his head. “I got you.” He managed to glare at me before he left, and I knew unless I was changed into someone at least as large and powerful, he would probably be waiting for me outside where he would want to put his new body—and mine—to the test.

As he stormed out of the courtroom, Taylor turned to face The Judge. “You called me Mr. Garcia. Who am I, and why do Lorenzo and I remember who we were?”

“I’ll answer the second question first,” The Judge replied. “We can’t always predict who will remember and who will not. It seems to have something to do with a personal sense of self, although someone with a presumably strong sense of self may lose his memories while someone with a weak sense of self retains his.

“As to your other question, you are Raymond Garcia, an economics instructor at Capta College.”

“I was an economics major in college.”

The Judge smiled. “I know.”

“But why am I male?” Taylor—now Garcia—wanted to know.

“I find it more appropriate to your sexual needs,” The Judge answered. Apparently the gay lifestyle wasn’t big in Ovid. Did that mean that if I changed into a girl and retained my memories, I’d have to... oh shit! I had to stay male. There was no way in the world I could ever be attracted to a man.

“Now, if you’ll excuse us, Mr. Garcia,” The Judge continued, “I must still deal with Mr. Malone.”

The new man nodded. He shot a glance at me before leaving, but at least it was one more out of sympathy than the menacing glare O’Hara had given me. When he was gone, The Judge looked down at

me. “Now, Mr. Malone, it’s your turn.”

“Wait!” I shouted. “Can’t we find a way to compromise? I’m very wealthy, as I’m sure you know. Perhaps we could make a deal...”

The Judge’s eyes narrowed. “A deal, Mr. Malone? From what I know of you, you only offer to make a deal when you’re cornered. Do you consider yourself cornered now?”

I felt my legs turn to jelly, but it had nothing to do with The Judge’s magic. I was on my own now, and there was no one there to carry water for me except my useless attorney. I knew what was coming—not exactly, of course, but I knew in general what was about to happen to me unless I could think of some way to prevent it. Apparently, a bribe wasn’t going to be the answer.

“Your Honor,” my attorney began, “I would like to point out that Mr. Malone is a well-known businessman. His... removal from society could have serious effects on the lives of his employees and their families—not to mention the national economy.”

“Ms. Jager,” The Judge sighed, “the argument has been used before in any number of courts, presuming that one man such as Mr. Malone here is so important that he is above justice. It is a specious argument since his ‘removal’, as you put it, will not even be noticed. True, his company will be gone, and perhaps even the products it has created, but others will take its place, and perhaps those who lead these other companies will have more to do with their time than lording over their employees in the fashion Mr. Malone seems to find necessary.”

“Lording over them?” I broke in with exaggerated indignity. “Your Honor, I employ tens of thousands of people, and while I may not be a ‘touchy-feely’ sort of manager, I treat them well.”

“Do you now?” The Judge said with mock surprise. “I suppose your intention to fire your flight crew and make them pay their own way back home was just tough love. And the way you falsely accused one of your closest associates of being homosexual was just your way of getting him to show some backbone? And what about the women you employ? Certainly your attempts to bed them are just a way of

showing them how important they are to the organization, and forcing them to wear clothing that exhibits more than most of them wish to display is simply your way of making them feel good about themselves. Isn't that right?"

I grimaced. He knew far more about me than I could have ever imagined. Apparently these seemingly magical powers he possessed were not limited to making showy transformations. I had only one card left to play.

"All right, Your Honor," I conceded, trying to appear humble, "I agree that I've done some... questionable things in my life. But I've never stooped to trying to blow up my competition. Whoever put those explosives on my plane—and I have a very good idea who it was—should be the ones you punish. I'll help you find the real guilty parties, how's that? I'm just an honest businessman trying to earn a living and provide for my employees."

"It doesn't wash, Mr. Malone," The Judge returned, and I could see he was about to go into his little trance and speak the strange words that would change my life far more than I would have imagined possible a few short hours ago.

What would I be? It was odd, but even as my body tensed for whatever would come next, my mind was curiously detached, weighing the possibilities. It was strange, but for me, time seemed to slow down in that moment before The Judge began to speak. I don't think it really did slow down: I think my mind was just moving at a thousand miles an hour. A quick mind had always been the real secret of my success. Would it be this time?

I realized that whoever The Judge transformed might sometimes remember who they were before. My flight crew had not remembered any previous lives—or at least that was how it appeared. They seemed nothing more than what they appeared to be—three attractive young teenyboppers who probably believed they had always lived in Ovid and most likely were either home with people who believed themselves to be their families or strolling along in a mall (assuming Ovid had one) giggling, trying on clothes, and trolling for boys.

Lorenzo and Taylor, on the other hand, remembered who they had been. That was both good and bad for me. It was good from the standpoint that I had a fairly even chance of remembering who I had been once The Judge had transformed me—and make no mistake about it: I knew I was about to be transformed. The bad side of the equation was that neither had any reason to like or help me, and while Taylor had seemed to not be concerned about me one way or the other, Lorenzo looked to be out for my blood. Wouldn't he just love it if I came out of the courtroom wearing the body of someone he could lord over. I shuddered more in concern of what he might do to me than what The Judge might do.

As The Judge began to utter the words that would probably define my existence—possibly for the rest of my life—I made the decision that if I could cling to my mental identity, I would try to make everyone believe that I no longer recalled my real life. But could I fool those in the courtroom? As nearly as I could tell, my attorney and the woman back in the gallery were just people like me. They may have even been transformed by The Judge as well to take on whatever roles he had assigned them to. The police officer who was acting as bailiff I suspected was... well, whatever The Judge was, although at that time I had no idea what the masters of Ovid really were. I would have to try to fool them. I suspected from the way they treated those who were transformed that they had no absolute foreknowledge of whether or not their victims retained their memories or not, but rather took their cues from the way the newly transformed reacted.

The changes were beginning. I could feel them coming from every part of my body. I garnered some small relief from the realization that the process was not painful. That is not to say however, that the process was not unpleasant. I felt as if my body had been turned into Jell-O, as it seemed to shake and shimmer while I stood there really unable to move. I could feel something happening between my legs, as my penis and testicles seemed to be drawn into my body. Something was happening on my chest as well, as the lower part of my rib cage seemed to be retracting while the top part was pushing forward. I had watched what had happened to the two men in my flight

crew, so I had no doubts about what was happening to me—I was becoming a woman.

I could feel the tickle of hair at the top of my ears—then suddenly the tickle extended to cover my ears completely and I could feel the weight of hair covering my shoulders and running down the back of my neck. I was suddenly allowed a small range of movement, until I could look down and see loose blond curls draped over growing breasts.

My clothing was changing as well. The neckline of my shirt changed into something more revealing and tighter over my chest. The color was a fiery red, and I knew from years of male experience that men's eyes would be drawn in by its hue and mesmerized by the cleavage it barely covered.

I had been so mesmerized by the expanding breasts that it wasn't until I felt air moving over my legs that I realized I was no longer wearing trousers. My legs felt bare for a moment, and then oddly confined. I had never experienced the feel of nylon in such a way, but now I realized my legs were smooth and covered in either pantyhose or stockings. The feeling seemed to end somewhere along my thighs, so I must have been given stockings and garters. Great. Now I'd have to be careful to not show a beaver in what felt like a tight skirt ending well above the knee.

I was suddenly thrust upward, balancing on toe and heel. I hadn't thought about the fact that I might be wearing high heels. How was I going to fake retaining my old memories if I had to try walking in heels?

As for retaining my old memories, I was still me mentally. I had noticed when my flight crew was transformed how their eyes had glazed over early in the process, denoting I was sure a loss of identity. I was relieved to realize that all my old memories were intact. That didn't mean the magic hadn't tried to imprint a new identity. I had felt something probing at my mind, trying to find an entry point—something like a computer virus infecting a hard drive, I theorized. But the changes in thought were held at bay, thank God.

I managed to glance at The Judge, hoping that he hadn't noticed my visual inspection of my body. My arms and legs could suddenly move again, but I disciplined myself to stand still so as not to make him think I was touching my new body to see if it was real or not. To my relief, it seemed to work. The Judge relaxed a bit, leaning back in his chair. I realized he had been looking for some sign which would have clued him that I remembered who I was. That meant for all his power, the preservation of identity might well be random, just as he had said. It was something I filed away for future use. It meant I might be able to fool more than my former employees. I might be able to withhold something from The Judge and his cohorts as well.

The tingling began to subside at last, and I knew that the process was nearly complete. From what I could tell without obviously staring at myself, I was an adult and fairly young, given my attire. I was still white. I didn't know at the time how often The Judge went in for racial changes as well as sex changes, but at least I wouldn't have to worry about any cultural changes. That made things a bit easier. I stood there before The Judge, hoping he would make the first move so I could react to it rather than coming up with something to say or do.

"I'll look these papers over, Ms. Lamar," he said at last, holding a sheaf of documents up for me to see. "Thank Mr. March for sending them over."

I forced a smile. "I'll be sure to tell him, Your Honor." It was working! He thought I had lost my memories.

Okay, I was obviously Ms. Lamar, but who the hell was Mr. March? Probably my boss, I reasoned. But that didn't tell me where I worked. I'd have to duck into the women's restroom and check my wallet... er, purse and see if I could figure out who I was and where I was supposed to go.

"Was there something else?" The Judge asked.

"Oh!" I had been woolgathering a little too long. "No, sorry Your Honor." I looked down at the table at the black purse which had miraculously appeared there. Its color matched my skirt, I noted.

“Thank you again, Your Honor.”

Hopefully that was obsequious enough. All I did was toady up to The Judge the way most people did to me. I was proud of myself for doing a good job of it, but it was a little on the disgusting side to be such a kiss-ass.

The good thing was that I was concentrating so hard on being the proper little sycophant that I forgot that I was wearing heels until I realized the clicking sound that followed me was coming from my own shoes. I nearly faltered then, but managed to suppress my fears by blanking my mind. To my delight, I realized that when I didn't think about it, I seemed to move about in heels as if I had always been female.

This was quite a revelation, I realized as I stepped out of the courtroom. Apparently something other than my new shape came with the transformation program. I had apparently been given some basic instincts which would help me to blend in. I wasn't sure how extensive these instincts were and I wasn't certain I wanted to test their limits. To do so might cause them to overwrite my real memories and erase my personality. Yeah, I know. I was thinking of all of this as if I were some sort of computer and The Judge's changes were some sort of application program, but considering my background, that was exactly how I saw things.

Once in the hall, I was not a bit surprised to see the transformed Lorenzo and Taylor waiting for me. I had been right to pretend to have forgotten my memories, as the look on the newly-minted Bill O'Hara's face confirmed. Taylor—now Garcia—to his credit didn't look too pleased to be standing there with O'Hara. In fact, he was not exactly standing with him. Instead, he stood across the hall, as if to show he was there reluctantly.

O'Hara's face spread into a wide, unpleasant grin. “Well lookie, lookie,” he taunted. “Just look what we have here.”

I feigned confusion. “Is there something wrong, Mr. O'Hara?” I asked innocently in my sweet little soprano, pouring on the Okie accent

everyone in town seemed to be saddled with.

O'Hara's grin suddenly faded. "You're Franklin Malone..." he uttered uncertainly.

"I'm not Francis Malone!" I laughed, intentionally 'misunderstanding' the name to make it sound as if I thought he had confused me with another woman. "My name is Lamar, silly," I told him in a tone approaching bimboish. Of course, I couldn't give him my first name since I didn't know what it was. I hoped he would be far enough off-balance to not note that.

While he stood there, trying to think of what to say next, I brushed past him, heading for the ladies' room. "Nice to see you, Mr. O'Hara," I called merrily over my shoulder.

Just when I thought I was home free, O'Hara rushed up to the rest room door, blocking my entry. "Wait just a minute!" he said menacingly. Apparently he hadn't completely bought my ruse. I stepped back, frightened. He was now a large and presumably strong man while I had become smaller and weaker. I had no doubts as to who would win our confrontation if things got physical.

Before things could go that far, the door to the ladies' room opened, and the attractive policewoman who had helped bring us in stood there waiting for O'Hara to step away from the doorway. "Men's room is the next door down," she told him, but the angry expression on her face told me she had heard our confrontation and was well aware of what was going on.

"This is private," O'Hara growled. It figured. Put a wimp in a big guy's body and he immediately wants to throw his weight around.

"So is this," the policewoman replied, tapping at the sign that clearly stated 'Women.' Suddenly, her frown disappeared and was replaced by an impish grin. "Of course, if you really want to go in there, we can go see The Judge and he can make it so you can go in there all the time."

O'Hara's face became pale as he blurted out, "He wouldn't!"

The policewoman nodded her head. "He would and he has. Unless you want to be next, I suggest you move along and leave Ms. Lamar alone. Officer Mercer will be out in a moment to take you where you need to be. Until then, I'm going to stay here and keep you company."

Reluctantly, O'Hara stepped away from the door and went over to stand next to Garcia.

"Thanks," I whispered to the woman.

"No problem, honey."

For the first time since I had arrived in Ovid, I felt safe as the rest room door closed behind me, and the real irony of it was that I had to find that safety alone in the ladies' room.

First things first. I walked over to the mirror to see just who I had become. I gasped when I saw myself for the first time...

I was a knockout.

Given my previous wealth, I had been exposed to plenty of beautiful women. Some had thrown themselves at me, anxious to share in my fortune. Others had been merely curious at what I was really like. Still others were... persuaded to visit my bed or face the consequences of crossing such a powerful man as I. Some of the women were naïve while others were sophisticated. Some were bright while others were downright idiots.

But none were as drop-dead gorgeous as the woman I had become.

Granted, what I was wearing added to the package. My short-sleeved top seemed ready to burst with my large, firm breasts. My makeup was not particularly heavy, but it accentuated my big blue eyes, my sweet, full lips, and my classic cheekbones. I had to look down to see my legs better, bending forward and feeling the weight of my breasts shift as I did so. My legs, wrapped in smoky nylon, would have made a Las Vegas chorus girl envious. Balanced on what had to be three inch heeled pumps, my ankles were downright perfect.

Oh, The Judge had really gotten my number. No wonder O'Hara had stared at me so. He knew what I had become: I was now my very own

wet dream.

I had always had a preference for blondes, so The Judge had turned me into one I could never have. I would have to be very careful. My new body could tempt an eighty-year-old Catholic Cardinal into inappropriate sexual behavior. As for the more mundane men around Ovid... maybe I should buy a gun just to keep them at bay.

Okay, so I knew what I looked like. The next step would be to find out just who I was. It wouldn't do to be pawing through my wallet if someone burst into the rest room. I'd have to have some privacy. I sighed, looking at the stalls. Well, I'd have to get used to sitting on public toilets sometime. And I did need the privacy. As for examining what was between my legs now (or rather what wasn't there), I'd save that for another time, thank you very much.

I entered the stall and sat down without pulling up my skirt, although it did hike up a considerable distance on its own, exposing the tops of my stockings and the garters holding them in place.

I fumbled with my purse, finally opening it and fishing for a wallet. It appeared as if my purse was typically stuffed with everything imaginable, including I found to my dismay, a couple of tampons. At last, I extracted the wallet, which had somehow managed to be at the very bottom of the purse. Why couldn't women learn to carry things in their pockets like men did? I thought. Then I realized how wide my butt felt as I sat there in the stall and tried to imagine what women would look like if they carried wallets on their backsides like men did. I giggled at the thought.

Giggled?

Shit.

My fingernails weren't terribly long, but they were longer than I was used to and I nearly broke a nail un-snapping the wallet. At least my nails were subtly painted an almost clear shade with just a touch of pink. If I had found myself with vivid red talons, I would have probably been just as happy to break them all off.

According to the Oklahoma driver's license in my wallet, I was now Holly Mae Lamar—a disgustingly cute little name if ever there was one. It sounded like the name a 50s movie studio would assign to a contract starlet. Come to think of it, with my long blond hair and porcelain skin, I could have been a 50s starlet. At least my feminine soprano voice wasn't breathy like Marilyn Monroe's. If it were, I would probably have had to kill myself from shame.

Things were bad enough as they were, though. According to the license, I was only five-four with blue eyes and, of course, blond hair. Worse yet—I was only nineteen years old and several months from my twentieth birthday. That meant I wasn't even old enough to stroll into a bar and drink myself into a stupor like I wanted to do.

The address on the license meant little to me, except for the fact that it had an apartment number. That meant I probably was out on my own rather than living with parents. At least I'd be able to act like myself at home... or would I?

Fearfully, I looked down at my left hand. I was afraid I'd see a wedding ring there since I knew a lot of girls in my high school class who married right after graduation. Given my looks, I'd be a fine prize for some local boy. To my relief, there was no wedding ring on my finger.

The next task was to figure out where I belonged. If I was nineteen, that meant I was out of school—unless there was a college around and I was a coed. As I learned later, there was a college, but I wasn't a student. I did find an insurance card which listed my employer as the Ovid Chamber of Commerce. I was probably a secretary, I reasoned. There was an address on the card—Cherokee and Main. If this was like most small towns—and at least in appearance it seemed to be—then Main Street was probably the primary business street. I had noticed what appeared to be the business district as we had driven to court. I would have no trouble finding it, I thought confidently.

To my relief, the purse also contained a set of car keys. They were keys to a Saturn, but at least it meant I had a car. I didn't relish the idea of walking around this strange little town in heels while every guy past the age of puberty zeroed in on my wiggling ass.

When I left the restroom, my two former employees were gone—presumably ushered out by the mysterious Officer Mercer. I let out a sigh of relief. At least I wouldn't have to contend with them.

The only Saturn in the parking lot was a little white coupe with just enough scratches and dings to make me think Holly had probably gotten it used. So whatever Holly did for a living apparently didn't pay particularly well. Secretary still seemed the most likely situation.

My mind was racing as I opened the door, and that was probably a good thing. Since I was so preoccupied trying to figure out where I was supposed to be and what I was supposed to be doing, I had let my body go on automatic. As a result, I got into the car in a ladylike fashion, sitting first and swinging my legs around so as not to give any onlookers a free ogle.

I wondered for a moment if I could just retreat into my own mind and let my body do all the work, but I suspected there were some real limits as to how far I could push the automatic responses. Besides, did I really want just to be a passenger in this body? Although it had been altered beyond all recognition, it was still my body, wasn't it? I couldn't very well let it go off half-cocked while I just went along for the ride.

At that point in time, I had no long-term strategy other than to keep the fact that I had retained my identity a secret. As long as I could do that, I would be able to fend off any problems with my former employees, and I might also be able to use it to my advantage in dealing with The Judge and any other powers in Ovid. Since The Judge obviously didn't like me any more than Taylor and Lorenzo did, keeping them unaware that I had retained my identity seemed the best course of action. As I had perceived in my business dealings, getting my opponents to underestimate me was usually the best strategy.

As for long-term goals, what should they be? Obviously, I wanted my old life back. I was one of the wealthiest men in the world—or at least I had been. I had no intention of trading that life in on the life of a nineteen year old bimchette with a nothing job who drove around in a beat-up Saturn. I was certain that The Judge had no intention of changing me back and returning me to my old life. While it wasn't

clear why he had done this to me, I was sure he expected my changes to be permanent. The only way I could get him to change me back was to figure out what his game was and how I could get enough leverage to force him to change me back. So the first of my long-term goals was to figure out just what was going on in Ovid.

As anticipated, I had no trouble finding the Ovid Chamber of Commerce. It was housed in a stand-alone red brick single story building that was generic enough to have been anything from a bank to a professional office. It had been built a block or so from the railroad tracks and at the lower end of the business district. While I had driven past a number of prosperous-looking shoppers along Main Street—some of whom had an odd transparency to them that Taylor had apparently noticed—the pedestrian traffic dropped off by the time I had reached the Chamber offices, since it was on the edge of the retail district. I parked my car in the lot behind the building and braced myself for playing the part of a brainless nineteen-year-old chick.

It was hard to appear nonchalant and scope out the office on my way in, but the open floor plan helped. Essentially, the Ovid Chamber of Commerce offices consisted of a short row of private offices along the window side and a conference room along the office wall. The rest of the floor was an open area where there were only a few desks, several filing cabinets, and the usual collection of office equipment, such as a copier and a fax machine. The only other person in the office was an attractive woman with medium-length brown hair. Judging by the conservative blue business attire she wore, I assumed (correctly, it turned out) that she was the office manager. She appeared to be in her mid-thirties and was seated in the last desk in the row. Only two desks were in front of her, the first desk obviously being the receptionist's station. I was reasonably sure that desk would be mine.

The woman looked up. "Everything go okay with The Judge?" she asked. Although she didn't say anything that would indicate she noticed something wrong with me, she did seem to be looking at me closely.

“Yeah, fine,” I replied airily, slipping my purse beneath the receptionist’s desk and sitting down, careful to smooth my short skirt.

“Are you... all right?” the woman asked. The way she asked it gave me the uncomfortable feeling that she suspected something. This could be a problem, I realized. If I couldn’t fool her, how did I expect to fool The Judge and his people for any length of time?

“Sure!” I replied, as perky as I could. “Why shouldn’t I be?”

The woman backed down. “No reason.” She sounded a little disappointed. “I just thought... Oh, never mind.”

I sighed in relief. I felt as if I had just passed an important test.

As the woman went back to work, I pretended to do the same, although in reality, I was scrambling to find out as much as I could about everything in the office. I turned to the computer on my desk and tried to open a *Be-All* window on screen, but the icon wasn’t there. Strange... How could Windows be loaded without a *Be-All* connection? Windows and *Be-All* had been linked since we had bought out Microsoft five years ago.

And what the hell was Windows XP?

I had a bad feeling about all of this. But I’d have to investigate what had happened to the *Be-All*/Microsoft connection later on. I spotted an icon which had the same Corinthian pillar image that was on the Chamber of Commerce sign outside. Clicking it, I got the Chamber’s web site and settled in to study my new workplace.

Fortunately for me, the staff wasn’t very big, and pictures of everyone were next to their names. The staff consisted of me, the woman who had just spoken to me (Karen Redmond), and a Leon Fobes, who was listed as the Executive Vice President and Chamber Manager. There was, of course, a Board of Directors, with an Aaron March of March’s Department Store listed as the President. At least now, I knew who Mr. March was. That would probably be enough to remember for now, I thought.

As I just scanned the other board members, my blood suddenly ran

cold. There, half way down the list was a William O'Hara of O'Hara's Tire Market.

Oh, crap. That was just what I needed. Even though Ovid appeared to be a fairly small place, I had entertained hopes of being able to avoid O'Hara as much as possible. I had surprised him by pretending to not remember my previous life, but I suspected he wouldn't let it go at that. If he saw me again, he was sure to test me—just to make sure I didn't remember my real life. If he could trick me, I was certain he'd try to make my life a living hell. And if he decided I was exactly who I appeared to be, I suspected his need to revenge himself on me would mean he would try to do everything to Holly he wanted to do to his former employer—and more.

The door opened suddenly, catching me by surprise. I was suddenly glad I'd done my homework, for as three men in business suits entered, I recognized the one in the lead as Aaron March. He was tall with the sort of build that made me think he worked out on a regular basis. With his dark hair and matching beard, he looked a little like a younger version of The Judge. I felt a kinship with him immediately. Here was a man who thought like I did, I realized—a decisive, no-nonsense sort of guy who was used to getting whatever he wanted. "Hello, Holly," he called out, in a confident baritone, piercing me with cold blue eyes. "Everything go all right with The Judge?"

He was testing me: I was certain of it. Careful to stay in character, I smiled and replied, "Just fine, Mr. March."

He nodded, apparently satisfied that I was nothing more than what I seemed to be. He headed for one of the offices, calling out a greeting to Karen as well. The second man acted almost as if he were Mr. March's shadow, following him step for step, a PDA in his hand at the ready. He reminded me a little in both appearance and demeanor of Lorenzo.

The other man, followed them, saying nothing and just nodding at me. I recognized him at once from his picture: this was Leon Fobes—my boss. He was smaller than Mr. March—no more than about five-eight. With his balding head and worried appearance, he looked almost

enough like the sycophant with the PDA to be his brother. After nodding at me, he scurried after Mr. March.

It was odd, but such a memory made me think for just a moment how silly Mr. Fobes' toadying looked. The guy with the PDA was no better. Lorenzo must have looked much the same as they did. Lorenzo must have hated being so obsequious. No wonder, I realized suddenly, O'Hara had it in for me so badly. I had made him look foolish when he was Lorenzo. Now, he was out to even the score.

As the door slammed behind the two men, Karen walked up to me. "I wonder what has Mr. March so mad at Leon."

"I don't know," I shrugged, not really realizing he had been mad at all. "Whatever it is, I hope he doesn't try to kick the dog."

"What?"

"You know," I explained. "It's the old story of the boy who gets chastised by his father, so he takes out his frustrations by kicking the family dog."

"Good analogy," Karen remarked. "I didn't think you were much for analogies."

Of course not, I chided myself mentally. I'm a dumb little blonde, and here I am making analogies. Watch it, pal, or it won't take long for her to figure out you still have all your memories. "I had a boyfriend who said that once," I told her. Maybe she'd just figure that somewhere along the line, Holly had accidentally dated someone with a brain in his head.

"It doesn't sound like anything Wally would say," she commented.

Oh-oh. Who was Wally?

"No, it wasn't Wally," I ventured.

"When are you going to drop him?" she asked, making me realize Holly had a boyfriend right now. And given the snide tone in Karen's voice, Wally didn't sound as if he was a winner. Great. This was just what I needed—a loser boyfriend. I'd have to avoid him if at all

possible.

“Wally’s okay,” I replied, figuring that would be the safest answer, but inside, I was figuring out just how fast I could dump this Wally guy.

It didn’t take long for me to figure out that Karen was senior to me. As a result, she seemed to get all of the real work while I got all the filing and typing, as well as answering the phones. We had the office to ourselves the rest of the afternoon, for about ten minutes after they had arrived, Mr. March went charging back out the door with the guy who appeared to be his assistant and my new boss meekly in tow.

I used the time to learn as much as I could about Ovid—which wasn’t much. I had never heard of Ovid before, but then again, there were plenty of small towns I had never heard of, so why should Ovid be any different? Strangely enough, it was different, though. Efforts at finding it on Mapquest proved fruitless. The same was true of a Google search. It was as if the town didn’t really exist.

I don’t know why I was surprised, though. The zany *Alice in Wonderland* feel of The Judge’s courtroom should have been all I needed to understand that Ovid wasn’t just a mundane little town stuck in the middle of the Bible Belt. I went back to the Chamber of Commerce website, which seemed to be the only one which even mentioned the town. I had a sneaky hunch that the website was restricted to only those of us inside Ovid.

The site gave a little history of the town—most of which I figured was bogus information anyway. It did mention that Vulman Industries had a large facility in town. At least I had heard of them—they did a lot of defense work as I recalled. But nothing on the site gave me any useful information.

“Let’s call it a day,” Karen called out. As I turned to face her, I saw her pulling her purse out of a desk drawer and slipping on her heels. I suddenly realized my own feet hurt since I had been wearing heels all afternoon. I’d have to remember to take them off as she had tomorrow.

Tomorrow. Shit, I suddenly realized this humdrum job was going to be

mine for a long, long time unless I could figure a way out of Ovid. It wasn't a challenging job, and that was the problem. Eight full hours of this job five days a week would turn my brain into pudding within a month.

I followed Karen out the door. "Don't bother locking it," she told me. "I just got a call from Leon. He and Mr. March are on their way back here right now. Mr. March will have Leon tied up for hours."

That was fine with me since I had no idea which of my keys locked the front door.

As if on cue, the two men, plus the assistant, rushed in the door again and headed for Mr. Fobes' office. Whatever they were working must really have their pantyhose in a twist, I thought. Well, it was none of my affair, so I followed Karen out the back door to the parking lot.

"See you tomorrow," Karen called cheerily as she headed for a small Buick parked near my Saturn.

I absently repeated her salutation, adding a small wave. I got into my own car somewhat ungracefully and breathed a sigh of relief. I was alone for the moment, and wouldn't have to pretend to be someone else until tomorrow morning. I couldn't wait to get to my apartment. I had looked up the address on a foldout map in the Chamber office and knew it to be not far from the town college.

Since I was alone for a few minutes, I considered what had been done to me and what I needed to do about it. The Judge had made me into a sweet little Suzy Secretary type, complete with what I assumed to be an onerous dress code, since Karen had been dressed in a short skirt and heels as well. Okay, so I required it of women in my office, but it wasn't a big deal. They were women—born and raised—and wearing things like that came naturally to them. As for me, on the other hand...

I had to give a smirk of appreciation. Okay, so The Judge had my number. He planned to put me on the receiving end of some of my own policies. I still didn't have to like it, and I vowed to find a way out of my unwanted new life. I was already starting to formulate a plan. For some reason, The Judge didn't want it known that Ovid existed. If

I could find a way of threatening him with exposure, I might have enough leverage to get him to change me back into my real self. At least the Chamber of Commerce might be a good base of operations. I could do research in the evenings as well, until I found out enough about Ovid to achieve my goals.

Yes, I had it all roughed out. The Judge bit off more than he could chew when he messed with me. I was plenty confident of that. Of course, I had no way of knowing that in the next hour, everything I had just planned out would be secondary to a more pressing problem.

I knew there was something amiss the moment I opened the apartment door. No, it wasn't woman's intuition or anything as hokey as that: a blind man—or woman—would have noticed the blare of the TV. It sounded like play-by-play on one of the pseudo sports ESPN2 was always running.

"That you, babe?" a man's voice called from the kitchen.

Instinctively I looked down at my left hand again. No, still no wedding ring, but the voice coming from the kitchen meant Holly had a boyfriend. Come to think of it, Karen had mentioned a boyfriend, but I had already forgotten his name. I hoped his presence just meant he had a key to my apartment, but from the distinctively unfeminine clutter in the apartment's living room, I was willing to bet he was a live-in boyfriend.

Why me? I silently thought. Now there'd be no quiet evening at home to try to come to grips with my transformation. I'd probably have to fight off Holly's boyfriend, because I had no intention of spreading my legs for him. Now if I could just remember his name...

A man appeared in the kitchen doorway. He wasn't a very big guy, for which I was grateful. If I had to fight him off, at least I wouldn't be up against King Kong. He was probably about five-eight—not exactly tall, but I reminded myself that he was still a good four inches taller than I was now. Dressed in a sweaty t-shirt and dusty jeans, he probably wouldn't have looked like much to any real girl, unless she was into bad imitations of James Dean. All he needed was a pack of cigarettes

rolled into the short sleeve of his t-shirt and the image would be complete—although come to think of it, I hadn't seen anyone in Ovid smoking.

There was one other thing I noticed about him—something that was hard to accept, even in a town like Ovid: he was transparent. Okay, not really transparent, but sort of there and not there at the same moment, if that makes any sense—just like the people I had seen on Main Street.

“What’s for dinner, babe?” he asked, looking at me with steely blue eyes as he leaned against the doorway, nonchalantly twisting the cap off a bottle of Bud.

Stay in character! I reminded myself. That meant I couldn't act on my first impulse, which was to turn and flee. “I... I haven't thought about it. I've had a tough day.”

Boy, was that ever an understatement!

He snorted, “You've had a tough day? Old man Reeves had us out in the hot sun all day cold patching the road out to Vulman Industries. Cripes, that stretch gets a lot of traffic now that their business has picked up. You'd think I could get hired on out there, but Jed says with my driving record, there's no way I could get on as a driver.”

Oh, was this guy a loser! The Judge must have really had it in for me. I would have bet big money that the prick wanted me to remember who I used to be so he could rub my nose in this life real good. Maybe I had spoiled things for him by pretending to have lost my memories. Not that it mattered, because I was going through exactly the hell he had planned for me, whether he knew I remembered or not.

“I'll see what's in the kitchen,” I finally said. I had almost suggested we eat out, but I didn't want to be seen in public with a lout like this. Besides, I wasn't the world's worst cook, although I hadn't cooked for myself since college. Get his gut stuffed with enough food and beer and maybe he'd sleep the night away on the couch. Otherwise, I hated to think about where he was probably used to sleeping.

He stopped me at the kitchen door, strong fingers tipped with nails black from asphalt digging into the tender skin of my slender arm. “Hey! Don’t I get a kiss?”

If his mouth smelled anything like the rest of him, kissing him would be like kissing a dumpster. Besides, I had no intention of kissing a man. ‘But remember,’ a little voice echoed inside my head, ‘you have to stay in character.’ God, I hated that little voice.

Okay—so I kissed him. I suppose there were worse things a girl could do with her mouth, but I didn’t want to think about them. As expected, his mouth tasted sour with the aroma of recently-drunk beer. To make it worse, his stubble was sharp and unpleasant when my cheek brushed against his. As I tried to pull away with a short, bland kiss, his strong arms drew me closer until my big breasts were pressed up against his chest. I could also feel something hard pressed against my groin, and I had been a man long enough to know exactly what it was. I felt absolutely sick.

Finally, he pushed me back, a look of confusion on his face. “What the hell’s wrong with you? That’s not much of a kiss.”

“I guess I’m just not myself today,” I told him truthfully. “I’d better fix dinner right now in case I’m coming down with something.”

‘There,’ I thought. ‘That should keep his libido under control.’ If he thought I was getting sick, he might leave me alone long enough for me to sort things out a bit. If not... well, there was no way I was going to keep him from jumping me, and as I had already discovered, just because he was a little bit transparent didn’t mean he wasn’t solid.

At least he left me alone in the kitchen—which was good because since I had my own personal chef, I hadn’t had much practice cooking since college. I checked the pantry and found lots of junk food but not much in the way of dinner. The refrigerator proved to be the mother lode, though, with a tub of stew which could be easily heated up. That and a loaf of fresh bread sitting out on the counter would make a decent if simple dinner.

“What do you want to drink?” I called out to him.

“Same as always,” he grunted back. Since there seemed to be an overabundance of beer in the refrigerator, it didn’t take much to figure out what that was.

He sauntered into the kitchen like he owned it—and maybe he did. I had no idea if this apartment was his, mine or ours. “Stew again?” he muttered, opening his beer as he sat down.

The way he wolfed it down, I was surprised I couldn’t see a lump of it in his semi-transparent stomach. There was nothing wrong with his appetite. I barely touched my own dinner. Part of that was probably the fact that women who looked like me didn’t eat a lot and maintain their figures very long, so my body was probably used to it. Part of it, though, was not knowing what to do to get out of this mess.

I had already made my bed when I pretended to have lost my memory. While I was still convinced that the only way I would be able to figure a way out of Ovid depended upon appearing to be harmless and brainwashed, it was going to be a much larger problem with this guy around. He’d figure out that something was wrong with me without any effort. If he hadn’t already had several beers from the smell of him, he would have probably figured it out by now.

But what was I to do? I couldn’t even remember his name. “Want another beer?” I asked him meekly while standing at his side, hoping he’d have so many he’d pass out.

“Nope,” he replied with his mouth still full of masticated bread. “Gotta go to work tomorrow, remember? Besides, I don’t want to be hung over when Billy and Pete and me go camping tomorrow evening.”

Camping! I was saved! I hoped he spent the whole weekend camping. Hell, I hoped he got drunk and fell in a lake and drowned or got eaten by a bear or something. Did they have bears in Oklahoma? I wasn’t sure. But surely there had to be something in the wilds big enough to eat the bastard.

“So how’s about we get the old pig in the blanket tonight to hold us both for a couple of days?” he said suddenly, his hand snaking out before I could react, grabbing me at my new sex.

I pulled back. “Sorry... honey. I told you I wasn’t feeling well, remember?”

He snorted. “Well you can’t be on the rag. That was just a couple of weeks ago.”

So where did a girl as cute as I was come up with a boor like this? “I... I think it’s the flu,” I lied, hoping he didn’t look any higher than my crotch where he might see the fear in my eyes.

“Flu?” he repeated, his hand dropping to his side. “Well stay away from me. I don’t need that on a camping trip.”

Oh yeah, he was a real sweetheart, wasn’t he?

Of course he left me to clean up everything. He just pushed back from the table and helped himself to another beer. In a couple of minutes, I heard the TV blaring out some ludicrous reality show. Part of me was pissed that he had left without so much as a by-your-leave, but a bigger part of me was happy he was out of my sight.

As I cleaned up the kitchen, I continued to fume—not so much at the pissant who was apparently my live-in boyfriend, but at The Judge. He had intentionally put me in this role, and I knew he had to be laughing his judicial ass off at my predicament. He had taken one of the most powerful men in the country and reduced me to a wiggly-jiggly little bimchette with probably no more than a high school diploma (if that), a dead end job, and an obnoxious boyfriend who probably would beat me given half a chance. Just to make it even more fun, I got to be eye candy around the office, complete with short skirts, high heels, and plunging necklines.

A little voice in my head suddenly pointed out the irony of my last thought. Come to think of it, I dressed no differently than the way I had required my female employees to dress. I had always told them it was a professional look—youthful, sexy, and so on. Some women had complained—even filing grievances against me—but our legal staff had been good enough to keep us just on the compliance side of all of our sexual harassment suits.

What would happen to me if I complained about the way I was expected to dress? For one thing, I doubted if I'd be able to contact anyone outside of Ovid to tell them of my plight, and inside Ovid, it wasn't hard to figure out that The Judge ran the show. Also, it would alert everyone that I had my old memories, since what I had seen of Holly so far indicated that she tolerated—or perhaps even enjoyed—wearing revealing clothing. Then if I complained, I'd probably lose my job and be dependent upon the goodwill (ha!) of my nameless boyfriend.

"I'm going to Randy Andy's," said boyfriend called out, and a moment later, I heard the door slam. What the hell was Randy Andy's? From the name, it was probably a strip joint, I imagined. I shuddered as I realized my predicament could have been worse. Instead of a sexy little receptionist, The Judge could have condemned me to writhing around a pole on stage at this Randy Andy's. As it was, my loser boyfriend would probably come home with a hard-on the size of a baseball bat after watching the strippers.

At least with 'the boyfriend' gone, I could do a little intelligence work. I had barely gotten through my first day as Holly as it was. I'd have to learn as much as I could quickly before someone—like the asshole Lorenzo had become—discovered I had all of my old memories. I decided to sift through whatever paperwork I could find in the apartment that might give me clues as to how to act.

I found some bills addressed to a Wally Krajewski. Okay, so my 'boyfriend' had a name, although not much of one. From the 'Past Due' stamps on some of them, it appeared Wally's main vocation of slouching and drinking beer was preventing him from handling his personal affairs very well.

Next, I found an edition of the local paper. It looked like the daily paper of many small towns around the country—lots of wire service stories, a smattering of comics, lots of mundane local news, some local sports stories about the football team of Ovid Senior High, and a smaller story on the recent track meet over at Capta College.

I was more interested in the ads, though. Presumably, most of the

companies who advertised in the paper would be Chamber members—members I would be expected to know. I picked up a few factoids. Duggan's IGA seemed to be the big supermarket in town, managed by a Jerry Patton. There was a Farmers' and Merchants' Bank, although no personnel were listed. Randy Andy's had an ad, and to my surprise, it appeared to be just a bar with food service and a few pool tables. Maybe Ovid was too small or too blue-nosed for strip joints. It was just as well. If it had been a strip joint, I would have probably been one of the featured acts.

I wrote out a crib sheet and stuck it in my purse. At least I would know on paper a little more about the town and some of its residents.

It was after I finished the paper that I hit the mother lode. Sitting on the table where I started to throw the paper was a slender volume bound in faux white leather. 'Ovid High School' was emblazoned on the cover, and under that 'Home of the Fighting Eagles' in smaller letters. I picked up the book and began leafing through it.

It was just as I had suspected. Holly Lamar had been a cheerleader. Also, judging by her activities, she had been one of the very, very popular girls. I remembered the type from my own high school days back in a small town in Washington where I had moved in with my aunt and uncle. Holly had probably been a bubbly, sexy little cheerleader who was hot for the boys while at the same time the boys were hot for her. As for her grades, well there was no mention of her for honor roll or any of the scholastic clubs. That was for nerds like I had been, I thought grimly.

There was a certain amount of irony in all of this. There I was—or rather had been—a nerdy sort of kid who could write computer programs in my sleep but who never had a date in high school. How I had envied the popular kids—the ones who got invited to all the fun parties and did all the fun things. Well, now I was one of those kids, only all grown up. So how had I ended up in a nothing job with a slob for a boyfriend?

The answer was simple, really. I thought back again to my own high school experiences. Contrary to many teen myths, the blond

cheerleaders didn't all go out after high school and marry the equally-blond quarterbacks. No, a strange thing happened to them, usually about their last year of high school. Suddenly, they found the high school boys too 'immature.' They would long for someone who could do more than throw a football and make farting sounds with their armpits. Someone a little older, perhaps, with a job so their boyfriends had money to spend on them. Somebody who had his own car—or more likely, a pickup truck. Somebody a little more... experienced, who didn't go off thirty seconds after he had penetrated her...

Someone like Wally.

I decided to look for Wally's picture in the yearbook, but I came up dry. Either he had dropped out or he was older than Holly—or both. Come to think of it, if he was going to this Randy Andy's, he must be old enough to drink beer—at least twenty-one. I had heard him drive away, and my keys were still on the kitchen table where I had left them, so he had a car. He said he worked for the county, so he had a steady job and probably had it when he started dating Holly. Okay, so Wally had everything Holly had been looking for, maybe including...

Don't go there, I warned myself. No wonder Wally had looked so disappointed. He was obviously used to getting his rocks off right after Holly walked in the door. I had put him off with the flu excuse, but that wouldn't last forever. What would happen when he decided I was no longer ill? He might not have been the brightest candle on the birthday cake, but even Wally would figure something was wrong if I put him off too long. And there was no way on the planet that I was going to spread my legs for the dork.

Well, I was only nineteen and a year out of high school, so I must have a home to flee to, I reasoned. Maybe I'd have to cry and plead with dear old mom and dad, but they'd take me back in, wouldn't they?

No, that wasn't an option, I decided about half an hour later after finding and reading some letters from my family. It turned out that 'mom and dad' had sold the family business and moved to the Rio Grande Valley in Texas to enjoy a long and comfortable retirement. Their letter expressed displeasure, and offered me the chance to go

live with them, but I knew I'd never be allowed out of Ovid. There was also a brother in Chicago with the same concerns and the same offer, but obviously that wouldn't work either. So if I was going to get out of this mess, I'd have to do it on my own, without blowing my cover as the sweet little submissive ex-cheerleader.

I looked up at the clock. It was nearly eleven, and I knew I'd have to be at work by eight, since that was the opening time embossed on the Chamber's front door. Deciding I had done about as much research as possible, I headed off for bed.

I put myself on automatic since I had no idea what Holly did to get ready for bed. As it turned out, it wasn't much more complicated than getting ready for bed as a man, with the exception of removing my makeup and arranging my long hair in a manageable ponytail. Of course, I had to sit to pee, but that wasn't as traumatic as I had feared it would be. I even remembered to wipe without prompting from my body.

When I was finished, though, I was standing before the bed without a stitch of clothing on. Just my luck, I groaned to myself. Holly was one of those girl who liked to sleep in the nude. What a nightly thrill that must have been for Wally.

It did, however give me the opportunity to get a good look at myself in the mirror. I had to admit, I was a fox. I could have made the centerfold at Playboy. Unfortunately, I suspected I was supposed to be about as brainless as most of the centerfolds, too. If I had lost my memory, I had no doubt I would have been reduced to the life of an insipid little sex toy. Man, The Judge must have really hated me. Why else would he have given me such full breasts, narrow waist, and inviting little pussy nestled between two of the finest legs I had ever seen?

Well, enough admiring myself, I thought. If I had been myself, I might have been turned on, but looking at this magnificent body was just looking at... me. Maybe that was the worst hell of all. I was forced to occupy a body that would have made a dead man sit up and take notice, but to me, it was just, well, me.

I slid under the covers with a sigh. It had been a long day and I needed sleep badly. Hopefully Wally the Weasel didn't wake me when he got in.

No such luck.

It was dark when I was awakened by the sensation of someone arranging my body, pulling me up so that my breasts hung down and my ass was in the air. A thousand sensations came back to me all at once. My mind was foggy, but I could tell from the weight of my breasts and the tickle of my ponytail on my shoulder that I was still in the body of a woman. That was a problem to be dealt with later.

The more immediate problem was the sensation of rough hands on my skin and something pressing against my asshole.

Now let me explain one thing. As a man, I had loved sex with a woman in almost any way imaginable—except one. I had never been a fan of anal sex. And if I had abhorred the idea of anal sex as a man, imagine my reactions to being awakened by someone's stiff penis pushing against my asshole. I practically threw myself off the bed, ignoring the fact that I was still stark naked.

In the silver moonlight, I could see the surprise in Wally's eyes. "What's wrong, babe?" He was still on the bed, up on his knees. There was enough light I could see his hard prick still poised for action. It made me shudder.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I screamed.

"Easy, babe," he pleaded. "You'll wake the neighbors."

"I'll wake the whole damn town if I have to!" I hissed. "Now what made you think you had the right to... to..." I couldn't even say it I was so upset.

"But you've always liked me to surprise you like that," he whined. "You always say it's real sexy."

Holy shit! Just what kind of a little slut was this Holly anyway? I was pragmatic enough to know that to keep anyone from knowing I still retained my memories, I might have to make love to a man before I

could figure out how to get out of this nightmare, but there was no way I was going to play the submissive little girl who took it up the ass and pretended to like it—assuming Holly had always been pretending.

“I told you I didn’t feel well,” I reminded him, avoiding telling him my real reasons for denying him.

“Hey, I’m not gonna catch anything giving it to you there,” he explained.

So that was it. He didn’t give a crap about how I felt, or what I wanted—it was all about him...

I suppose what happened next could be called an epiphany of sorts. Wally was crass and smelled of sweat and beer, but he was no more selfish than I had been, I realized suddenly. Had I ever really asked one of my lovers what they wanted? Of course not. I was the rich and powerful Franklin J. Malone, and when I was ready for sex, that was all that mattered. True, I would never wake a girl up by shoving my penis into an unsuspecting orifice, but that only made me marginally better than the piece of crap who was staring at me from the bed. Like Wally, Franklin J. Malone wouldn’t have cared for a minute about what his lover wanted: it was all about what he wanted.

“What the fuck is wrong with you anyway?” The whine had left his voice to be replaced by anger. I had surprised him with my refusal, but now he had had a few moments to put things into perspective—his perspective that is. Obviously (in his mind), he had done nothing wrong. I was just being unreasonable. After all, what girl in her right mind would balk at the idea of being ass-fucked by a stud like him?

“Leave me alone,” I muttered, heading for the bathroom.

“Wait a minute!” He jumped off the bed, grabbing my arm.

“Ow!” I was going to have a bruise on my upper arm in the morning, I thought, but when I was spun around and looked in his eyes, I realized a bruise might be the least of my problems.

“I’m gonna be camping with the guys all weekend,” he growled, “and I don’t expect to be so horny I have to go whack off in the woods.” He

threw me down on the bed and tried to spread my legs, but I fought back with a reserve of strength I could never have imagined this little body could have had.

“Leave me alone!” I screamed, beating on his chest with my dainty little fists.

In retrospect, Wally probably wasn’t any worse than a lot of guys who were used to having it all their way. He roughed me up, but he didn’t strike me, but that might have come later. I didn’t know how strong or violent one of these transparent people could be, but I suspected they were just as strong and had just as large a penchant for violence as any normal person. It was just possible that I had pushed all of the wrong buttons and made him mad enough to kill me.

Although he was now aiming for my slit instead of my ass, I didn’t want to be fucked. At that time, I had no way of knowing I was temporarily immune to pregnancy, and Wally didn’t look like he was interested in using any protection. I could only think of one solution that would ensure my personal safety—as disgusting as that solution was.

“Wait!” I gasped, stopping him momentarily from his efforts to spread my legs.

“What?” he said impatiently.

“How... how about a blowjob?”

I could feel his weight shifting and the pressure on my arms decreasing. “A blowjob?”

Oh surely somebody as slutty as Holly gave him blowjobs all the time, I thought. Still, maybe she liked being screwed so much that blowjobs were reserved as a special treat. “Yeah, how about it?” I asked, trying to stay calm.

“Okay!” he agreed, the anger in his voice replaced with almost childish glee.

I did the best I could, and he seemed to really enjoy it. Well, I suppose having been male for so many years, I had a pretty good idea what a

man wanted in a blowjob. From my perspective, though, I couldn't imagine ever doing it from this side of the sexual fence voluntarily. His member practically gagged me, and rather than let me take it down slowly, he rammed it down my throat, causing me to throw back my head just to take it all in. I had a pretty good idea that was how he would have done me if I had spread my legs for him, too, so I kept reminding myself that this was probably less uncomfortable than the alternative.

Fortunately, it didn't take him long to go off. I was afraid from the smell of all that beer that he would be a little desensitized, but that wasn't the case. It was almost a relief for me when he came, since I was having some trouble breathing with him in my mouth.

I tried not to think about the taste as I swallowed. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, but it wasn't exactly ambrosia either. I made a silent vow to myself that I would never do this again, even if it meant revealing that I had retained my memories.

Fortunately for me, he seemed satisfied, leaving me there on the bed without a word as he went into the bathroom to clean up and get ready for bed. It was just as well. While he was in the bathroom, he couldn't hear my sobs.

Once he had come back to bed, he turned away from me and was snoring within a couple of minutes. I used the opportunity to go to the bathroom and clean up myself, paying particular attention to gargling. I must have used half a bottle of mouthwash. Then I brushed my teeth three times, just to make sure there was no trace of him left in my mouth. That done, I tiptoed back to bed so as not to wake him. I fell asleep a few minutes later, a curse for The Judge still churning through my mind.

When the alarm went off, Wally was already gone—thank God. I didn't know if he had left for work or already started his camping trip and I didn't care. Maybe with any luck, he'd be eaten by a bear. Did they have bears in Oklahoma? I wasn't sure. Well, maybe something big

and hairy would eat him. I could only hope.

As I trundled off to the bathroom, I felt terrible. No, I wasn't physically sick, but I was ashamed of myself. I hadn't been a woman for even a full day and yet I had already put a man's penis into my mouth. It felt so gay. I might have the body of a woman, but in my mind, I was still a man, and men didn't give blowjobs to men unless they were gay, did they?

At least I hadn't let him screw me. I couldn't imagine what that would be like, although I did feel a small twinge from between my legs, as if my body was trying to give me a little hint of how it might feel. I suddenly became concerned that although I had retained my male mind, my body was certainly in no way male and might very much have its own agenda. Okay, maybe I'd try sex sometime, but not with Wally the Weasel.

I went on automatic to get ready for work, and watched something of a passenger as my body efficiently showered, picked out clothing and did makeup. The shower was interesting, and I was nearly tempted to go off automatic and do a little exploring, but I didn't want to be late. Besides, I didn't really want to stimulate this body. The twinge I had felt earlier warned me that this body, once turned on, might be a little difficult to turn off again.

I was pleased to see that my makeup was designed more to make me look a bit more mature rather than displaying me as a tart. While I retained my youthful beauty, I at least looked more like I belonged in an office than on a street corner.

For clothing, my body selected a tan suit with a red shell underneath. While the shell showed a little more cleavage than I would have liked and the skirt fell provocatively above my knees, the outfit was at least businesslike. In my former identity, I would have heartily approved of any of my female employees who wore such an outfit. A thin gold necklace, a couple of gold bracelets, and a plain gold ring completed the look. By the time I slipped into a pair of brown leather heels, I looked every bit the young businesswoman—or at least the moderately-slutty young businesswoman.

As I drove to work, I thought to myself that the only way I could avoid sex with Wally would be to move out on him. That I resolved to do. I'd spend Saturday finding a new apartment and Sunday moving my things. I was a little concerned at what his reaction would be when he came home and found me gone, but whatever it was, it would be better than greeting a slob smelling of campfires, beer and raw fish who expected sex the minute he dragged his sorry ass in the door.

The worry must have been written all over my face, for the minute I walked in the office, Karen said, "You look stressed, girl. What happened?"

Obviously, I couldn't tell Karen exactly what happened, or explain to her why I was suddenly so upset, so I just shrugged and replied, "Wally and I aren't getting along. I'm thinking about moving out."

Karen's face brightened. "Well it's about time!"

Then she thrust a thick folder into my hand. "You'll have to tell me all about it later. Right now, we need to get ready for the luncheon."

"Luncheon?" I blurted out, struggling to keep documents from flying out of the folder.

"The Board of Directors' luncheon," she said, looking at me as if I were the village idiot. "It's the first Friday of the month, remember? We always have the Board luncheon on the first Friday."

"Oh... yeah," I remarked, probably sounding like the ditzy blonde I was supposed to be. At least I was in character.

Karen left me to go over the file as if I had handled the luncheon before. I probably had, I realized, since a lot of the notes in the file were in my handwriting. To my relief, it looked like all the arrangements had been made. The luncheon was to be held at someplace called the *Greenhouse*, and apparently Holly had already called to confirm that all ten board members would attend (which meant my nemesis, Bill O'Hara, would be there), as well as a Mr. Deimler and a guest speaker.

I gulped when I saw the name of the guest speaker. Raymond Garcia

was noted as a doctoral candidate in economics and an instructor at Capta College. That was Taylor's new identity. It was bad enough that Lorenzo—now Bill O'Hara—would be at the luncheon, speaking on Ovid's economic future. Now I'd have to contend with Taylor as well. This was shaping up to be another shitty day.

Once I had everything ready for the luncheon, I found out I had no other burning issues to contend with. Apparently Karen thought that last minute details for the luncheon would take Holly all morning. My namesake must have been a real ditz, indeed.

I used the remaining time of the morning for my primary task—finding a way out of Ovid. The computers in the office were all linked in a small, crude network. I had reasoned that whoever ran Ovid would have control of key institutions—including the Chamber. Leon Fobes, I reasoned, was a powerful man controlling one of those institutions, but even more powerful was the man he seemed to fear—Aaron March. Mr. March even had an office and a computer in the Chamber building. Even with my lack of experience in this Windows XP system, I was proficient enough with computers to break into the security protocols of Mr. March's computer in about half an hour. I could have done it sooner, but I had to answer the phone a few times as well.

In my desk drawer, I had found a flash drive. I quickly downloaded the document files from Mr. March's computer, planning on examining them in detail when I was in private. It was a shame Holly didn't have a computer at home, but I planned on buying one as soon as possible. Then, I'd study what was on the flash drive and see if the documents contained any clues I could use to get my real life back and get the hell out of Ovid.

Okay, it was a long shot. I realize that now and considered it strongly even then, but what other choice did I have? Anyone who had the power The Judge had could only be convinced to change me back if I had something on him and his operation. Otherwise, I might as well plan on spending the rest of my life in skirts and heels, being the butt of blonde jokes.

Karen drove us to the luncheon, arriving half an hour before the

meeting time. I was relieved to see the restaurant already had everything organized—a long table set for fifteen, a podium, and a banner tacked to the back wall which read: ‘Ovid Chamber of Commerce—Committed to the Future’ in big red letters.

Mr. March rushed in, Mr. Fobes and the guy with the PDA right behind him. Since the guy with the PDA looked as if he was staying for lunch, I assumed—correctly as it turned out—that he was the Mr. Deimler listed as a guest at the luncheon.

The Board members started showing up about ten minutes before the luncheon. I recognized a couple of them from their pictures—there was Charles Tilton, the president of the Farmers’ and Merchants’ Bank, and Kenny Hamilton, who ran a local car dealership. Then there was Susan Jager—our so-called attorney. There was one other normal person—a middle-aged man who walked with a limp and seemed to be someone important. I couldn’t remember his name, though. The rest who came in appeared to be some of the transparent people. O’Hara was nowhere in sight, and I had an inkling of hope that he wouldn’t attend. My hopes were dashed when he came striding in, a big smirk on his face when he spotted me.

“Good to see you, Holly,” he said jovially as he boldly slipped his arm around my waist. He was trying to cop a feel as his hand slid up toward the bottom of my breasts.

Tactfully, I danced away from his embrace and forced a thin smile. “Good to see you, too, Mr. O’Hara.”

Fortunately, at about that time, one of the other Board members tapped him on the shoulder and expressed interest in a new set of tires for his delivery truck. I think O’Hara would have preferred to continue to harass me, but business was business, and he allowed himself to be pulled away.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I scurried down to the other end of the table where Karen and I would be seated. We were expected to take good notes and Karen was required to take a couple of pictures for the local paper. Apparently in a small town, this passed for news. I wondered if

the editor of the paper had any inkling of how much news there really was in Ovid.

Just before I could sit down, our guest speaker arrived. I recognized him, of course, as I had witnessed his transformation the day before. Of course, I wasn't supposed to know about that. I had to admit, Taylor carried himself well as a man. He actually looked sophisticated with his neat beard, tanned skin, and gray tweed sport coat with a solid blue tie over a light gray dress shirt. He carried a pile of handouts in one hand.

Spotting me, he began, "Hi, I'm Ray Garcia." He offered his hand. "I'm supposed to be your guest speaker today."

I noticed he seemed to be a little embarrassed. Although we hadn't officially met in our new roles, I had seen him with the newly-minted Bill O'Hara when the former Lorenzo had tried to get me to admit I still had my memory yesterday. I decided to keep him on the hook as I took his large hand in my tiny one. "Oh, aren't you the man who was with Mr. O'Hara yesterday at City Hall?"

"Uh, yes," he admitted ruefully. "I don't know what Bill was going on about though, do you?"

I shrugged, feeling my breasts bounce as I did and smiled. "I haven't the foggiest. I guess it was some kind of joke, but I just didn't get it." Yeah, I sounded like a proper blonde all right.

His eyes caught the motion of my breasts, but he quickly looked me in the eye again, his cheeks turning slightly red. "Yes, that must have been it—a joke. I'm afraid I didn't get it either."

I liked his voice. It was one of those pleasant baritones I would have loved to be blessed with when I was a man. "Well, good to meet you." I smiled again, finally pulling back my hand.

Before he could reply, Mr. March grabbed his arm. "Glad you could make it, Mr. Garcia," he said as he ushered him to the place of honor at the head of the table next to his own seat.

The luncheon went smoothly. Mr. March reported on the state of the

Chamber—membership was up by ten percent since the first of the year and there was plenty of money in the bank. Vulman Industries, whose president turned out to be the fellow with the limp, was still hiring engineers, and it became obvious that Vulman was the crown jewel of Ovid's economic engine.

I was actually impressed with Taylor's—or rather Ray Garcia's—speech. He kept it short and simple, but his remarks on Ovid's economy were actually interesting. The Judge and his cronies had built up quite a little town, it seemed. Unlike most small farm towns, the presence of a player like Vulman Industries kept the town prosperous. Primarily a producer of automobile parts, Vulman had defense contracts as well, and seemed to be on the verge of an exciting new product. Eric Vulman, the limping president of the company, was as much of a mover and shaker in Ovid as Aaron March, it seemed. I was reasonably certain they were both in cahoots with The Judge, too.

After the meeting, Ray Garcia stayed around for a few minutes. I assumed he was waiting to talk to someone important, but as I busied myself cleaning up all of the Chamber paperwork, he came over to me. “Holly, could I speak to you for a moment?”

“Sure, Mr. Garcia.” I put the papers I had collected on the table and faced him.

“I know you remember,” he said bluntly after checking around to make certain everyone else was out of earshot.

My heart dropped down to the floor. “I... I don't know what you mean, Mr. Garcia,” I stammered.

“Cut the crap.” His voice was soft but authoritative. “While I was speaking, I was watching you. I've been wondering if Lorenzo—I mean O'Hara—was right about you. So I watched you today. Whenever you're talking with someone, you act like the perfect little bimbo receptionist, but when you don't think you're being watched, I can see the intelligence in your eyes. Today, during the luncheon, your eyes were on March and Vulman. You've picked them out as big-wigs—and you're right, too.”

“All right,” I sighed. Even if I didn’t admit it, he was too sure of himself to believe my denials. “Just please don’t tell anyone else—especially O’Hara. He’d love to crap all over me.”

“And with good cause, too,” Garcia pointed out. “But don’t worry. I’ve never liked him either. He used to try to put the moves on me. Can you imagine that little wimp trying to get in my pants?”

I couldn’t help but giggle just a little. “Not anymore I can’t.”

He grinned. “Look, can I buy you a cup of coffee? I’d like to talk with you and understand why you’re pretending to have lost your memories.”

“I can’t now.” Then my face brightened, remembering that my so-called boyfriend was out of town. “You can buy me dinner, though.”

“How would that look?” he returned. “Don’t you have a boyfriend or something? What if your boyfriend found out?”

“He’s out of town for a couple of days. By the time he gets back, he won’t be my ‘boyfriend’ anymore,” I vowed grimly.

“Okay,” he sighed. “Dinner it is.”

I gave him my address and headed back to the office, strangely pleased with the idea of having dinner with him.

I had more time for personal research that afternoon—primarily because it was a repeat of the previous afternoon, with Mr. March holding court in his Chamber office while Mr. Fobes and Mr. Deimler rushed in and out, calling for information or checking something in the files. They looked frightened—I had seen that sort of fear in underlings’ faces before as I had once been able to engender it myself.

Something had them very worried, and I decided it would be to my advantage to find out what it was.

“What’s going on in there?” I asked Karen. She was busy sifting through some files herself. In fact, she had been too busy all afternoon to pay much attention to what I was doing, which was good.

“Don’t ask,” she warned me.

As curious as I was, that was fine with me. While they kept Karen busy, I had made significant progress in my own efforts. Since I had already broken into Mr. March's computer, it was easy for me to mirror what he was bringing up on the screen. Unfortunately, most of it didn't make sense to me. Why was he bothering to access data on the Middle East? For that matter, how was he bringing up this data? It appeared to be official Defense Department documents.

Then I noticed the date on one of the documents as he left it on his screen. It was dated nearly fifty years in the future! It showed casualty figures from a recent assault on Tripoli. The city had fallen to Western Coalition forces—whoever they were—but at the cost of nearly five thousand lives and a ship listed as a TPS, which I saw expanded later in the document to be a Tactical Platform Ship.

It was like reading science fiction, but given what I had already seen—and experienced—in Ovid, the prospect of being able to gaze a half century into the future didn't seem all that bizarre.

"What are you working on?" Karen called out.

I must have jumped a foot. She was still at her desk, but I quickly blanked my screen just in case. "Oh, just the data base," I replied as generically as I could.

"Give me some help here, would you?"

I cut my connection to Mr. March's machine and went back to help Karen. I had all of these documents on the flash drive, so I'd have to look at them later.

I got home after work to an empty apartment, for which I was truly grateful. For the first time since I had come to Ovid, I was really alone. Of course, what had I done about that? I had set up a dinner with Ray Garcia. That had been stupid of me. Still, it would be good to be able to stop playing the role of the bimbo receptionist for awhile, and Ray hadn't tried to embarrass me as O'Hara had. Besides, combining Ray's knowledge with mine might help me to find a way out of Ovid just that much quicker.

I debated about what to wear, not really realizing at the time how feminine my thoughts on that issue had already become. It was dinner, so I didn't want to dress down too much. Ray hadn't said where we were going, so I didn't know quite how to dress. I really wanted to get out of the pantyhose and heels, though. In the end, I opted on a more casual skirt—one of the more conservative ones Holly owned. It was a denim skirt that fell just above the knee, and it looked pretty good with bare legs and a pair of sandals with a much lower heel. I selected a white blouse, cut a little like a dress shirt. Since it didn't hug my breasts quite so closely, it didn't call attention to them like everything else I had worn.

Ray picked me up right on time. I was relieved to see he was wearing the male equivalent of my outfit—jeans, a blue and white striped shirt that could have been worn as a dress shirt. Of course, I thought enviously, his outfit didn't leave his legs bare as mine did, nor did it offer easy access like a skirt. Also, he hadn't had to spend extra time reapplying makeup or changing jewelry to match or fiddling with long hair as I did. I hadn't realized as a man how much crap a woman had to go through just to get ready for a date.

No, no... wait a minute. This wasn't a date. Not really. This was just... just... a meeting of two people with a common agenda who were trying to learn more about their captors. Yeah, that's all it was. It wasn't a date. No siree, it was positively not a date.

"Hi," Ray said simply at the door. He was trying to look me in the eye, but I caught his eyes travelling up and down my body. In a strange sort of way, I felt a sudden surge of pride that I had gotten my look right.

"Hi," I responded, grabbing my purse. Okay, so we were both acting like a couple of teens out on their first date. I couldn't help it, though. The body I now inhabited was programmed to respond favorably to a handsome male, and Ray was, indeed, handsome, with his Mediterranean skin and his dark hair and piercing dark brown eyes. He was Antonio Banderas compared to Wally, and as he guided me to his car, he proved to have manners to match, even opening the car

door for me.

“Nice wheels,” I commented, looking at the little black Audi convertible he had brought. And to think—I got stuck with a shitty little Saturn.

“Thanks,” he smiled, getting in himself. “I was pleasantly surprised when I saw it. Apparently Ray Garcia is your typical swinging bachelor college professor. It’s fun, really.”

“Good for you,” I grumbled enviously. “You ought to see it from my side.”

“I have, remember?” he pointed out. “I spent a lot of years in skirts and heels.”

“And you prefer to be a man,” I guessed. “I suppose you would with your sexual preferences and all.”

“It’s not just that,” he corrected me. “Most gay people are perfectly happy to be the sex they were born with. I didn’t mind being a woman. But it was a little tough sometimes. When I’d stare at a woman and she turned out to be straight, I’d get the death gaze back. Now though, I can look at a woman and she takes it as a compliment. Of course, it’s taking a little time to get used to what’s between my legs.”

Me, too, I thought, but obviously not in the same way.

We pulled up in front of a little Italian joint off the main drag. *Tony’s Real Italian Pizzeria*, the sign boasted. I suppose it was real enough—the usual checkered tablecloths and candles in Chianti bottles. The lighting was dim and the crowd small, which I figured was why Ray had picked this place. We were led back to a secluded booth in a back corner where we were afforded some privacy. I blushed a little though, when the hostess shot me a sly smile and whispered in my ear, “Nice going, Holly.” Since she was about my new age, she probably thought she was a classmate of mine. Maybe she was.

After we had ordered, Ray leaned forward and asked, “So why haven’t you told anyone that you still have your memories? Is it because of O’Hara?”

“Partially,” I admitted. “That’s certainly the way it started out. Then I

decided if I could make everyone think I no longer remembered who I had been, I'd be able to figure out what was going on here and find a way to get my life back."

"Nice plan," he commented, "but it won't work."

He paused while the drinks were delivered—Cokes for both of us. He had cancelled the wine order after the waiter had asked to see my ID, embarrassing me terribly. I felt like a child going out to dinner with an adult.

He sipped his Coke. "Ah, a fine vintage."

"Don't rub it in," I growled. "Now what did you mean when you said it wouldn't work?"

"Nobody gets out of Ovid," he told me bluntly. "Even if you could, your old life is gone."

"Gone?"

"Sure. I checked a few things out myself. Steven Jager—he's our attorney's husband—is an instructor over at Capta just like me. He said once The Judge changes you, the world outside Ovid forgets you ever existed. Haven't you found out for yourself by contacting someone in your family?"

"I don't have any family," I sighed. "My parents died in an accident when I was young. I was raised by an older aunt and uncle. We didn't exactly get along. I haven't spoken to them in years."

"Well even if you did call them, they wouldn't remember you," he said. "I looked up *Malone Software*. It doesn't exist. But guess what? Microsoft is a giant corporation."

"So that's why the computers at work don't have *Be-All*," I muttered. "And that's why that funny Windows XP is the operating system."

He smiled. "You've got it now. So you see, even if you could get away from Ovid—and from what I hear that's not an easy task—no one would remember you unless The Judge could somehow agree to set things back the way they were."

“And that’s not likely to happen, is it?” I asked dully.

He shook his head.

“So why has The Judge done this to us?” I asked, almost moaning as I did. I could feel hot tears in my eyes and feel myself trembling in frustration.

“That I can’t find out,” Ray admitted. “Even when you know who The Judge is, it’s hard to determine his motives. No one seems to know—even Steven Jager. Given that his wife works pretty closely with The Judge, that tells me only His Honor and the others in town like him know for certain what’s going on.”

“You said you know who The Judge is,” I prompted. “Okay, who is he?”

The answer had to wait until a large pepperoni pizza was placed in front of us. I had to admit, the pizza smelled great, but I held off eating until Ray could answer. At last, he told me, “We’re prohibited from talking about that. If I were to try, I’d just start gasping for air. I can give you a hint, though. Go to the Ovid Library tomorrow and look under ‘Myths and Legends’.”

I stared at him blankly, waiting for him to laugh, but apparently he wasn’t joking. “Okay, I will.”

We attacked the pizza and I listened as Ray told me a few other things about Ovid. Some of them I had already determined, but much of the information was new. By the time we had finished off our dinner, I had an even broader picture of Ovid, but nothing I could use to leverage myself back into my old life.

I was beginning to fear that Ray might be right. I might be stuck as Holly Lamar for the rest of my life. It wasn’t a pleasant thought. Holly had no real prospects—she had a dead-end job, a louse for a boyfriend, no advanced education, and looks that would ensure that no one thought of her as anything but a brainless little piece of eye candy. In a few years, she (I) would start to lose those magnificent looks and settle for somebody like Wally who would at least take care

of her. The rest of her (my) life would be all downhill, consisting of a mundane existence and a scrapbook full of might-have-beens. It wasn't much to look forward to.

We sat there in relative privacy sipping additional Cokes as Ray told me about his own experiences, realizing that he was now an economics instructor. To my surprise, he liked it.

"But isn't it boring?" I asked. "You know—the dismal science and all that? I would think after being out in the real world, teaching economics to a bunch of thick-skulled underclassmen would be pretty dull."

He shook his head. "No, not really. It's actually a challenge to keep up with some of them, given that I am sort of rusty at all of the theory. What surprised me was that even some of the shades are very bright. I thought they'd just be placeholders."

"Shades?"

He nodded over at our waiter, who was one of the semi-transparent people. "Those are shades. They look a little funny, but they're as solid as you and I."

"That's for sure," I mumbled.

"What?"

"Oh," I said offhandedly, "my boyfriend is a... what did you call them? He's a shade."

"Really!"

I felt myself blush. "Yeah, well, he's going to be my ex-boyfriend by tomorrow."

"I understand," he commiserated. "Not into boys, eh?"

"That's right." Or at least I never had been into boys. Strangely enough, I had experienced a couple of unguarded moments when I had found myself looking at boys—or rather men—with a new set of eyes—figuratively as well as literally. And it wasn't all about physical attributes, either, as it had always been for me with women. I found

myself admiring how men carried themselves—their confidence and their awareness.

That wasn't to say I hadn't noticed that Taylor had become an attractive young man. I did notice, but I wasn't drawn to him for his handsome features or his masculine attributes. Instead, I was somewhat fascinated by how quickly he had acclimated to this new life and how confident he acted.

Now don't get me wrong: I wasn't falling for a man. I hadn't been a woman long enough to do that and hoped that I never would. But when our positions had been reversed, I had seen Taylor only as an attractive woman and a potential bed mate. I had to admit that as competent as she had obviously been, I hadn't been fascinated by her abilities—only by her appearance and a little intrigued by her attitude.

Now that I was the woman, though, I saw her—him—in a much different light. He had become a man I could call a friend. Come to think of it, as a man, there had really been no one in years I could consider a true friend. Yet here I was, in the body of a young woman, confiding in Ray as if we had been close for years.

Ray took me back to my apartment right after dinner. Other than putting his arm around me gently and helping me into the car, he had been strictly hands off—a perfect gentleman, in other words. There was even no demand to come into my apartment or kiss me good night as he walked me to my door.

I had to admit I was relieved. I had been somewhat worried that like Lorenzo, Taylor in her new identity would be looking to extract her pound of flesh from me. After all, Taylor was now the big strong man—a little bigger and probably stronger than I had been as a man—and I was now the little weak woman—considerably more disadvantaged in terms of education and position than Taylor had been. I wouldn't have blamed her—him—if he had used our dinner as an opportunity to get even with me.

Which begged the question: why had I even agreed to go out to dinner with him? Hell, agreed? I had even suggested it. What had I

been thinking? I suppose it was because I had the fear that if I couldn't be myself with someone, I might actually become the spacey little bimbo I appeared to be. And even though Taylor and I hadn't always gotten along well, I begrudgingly admired her for her abilities. Her competence had obviously transferred over to her new persona as Ray Garcia, and I found myself strangely drawn to the individual I had known as Taylor.

"Good luck at the library tomorrow," he told me, just touching my hand.

"Thanks," I smiled, looking up into his dark eyes as they were reflected in the porch light of the apartment's outside entry. "Say, where is the library anyway?"

"I'm not sure where the city library is," he admitted slowly. "Come to think of it, the college library might be a better choice."

"Maybe you could show me where it is tomorrow?" What in God's name had made me say that? It was a small college for cripes sake. I could certainly find it myself, couldn't I? It shouldn't be that hard to find.

His face brightened. "Sure. I'll pick you up at about nine and we can have breakfast, too."

"Oh, I can make us something here," I said quickly, slogging even deeper into something I probably should have left alone. "I'm not much of a cook." I shrugged. "At least I wasn't much of one... before. I could always go on automatic, though."

"You just make the coffee," he laughed. "I'll bring some rolls or donuts. We'll test your cooking skills another time."

"Great!" I chirped, jumping up on tiptoe to kiss him on his whiskered cheek.

I... kissed... him... on... the... cheek...

He smiled bashfully. "Well, good night, Holly."

"Good night, Ray," I managed demurely, closing the door behind

me.

“Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn!” I stormed around the bedroom in nothing more than a bra and panties. What the hell had come over me? I was acting like something out of a Meg Ryan movie (the early ones at least). Maybe the automatic reactions had kicked in. Maybe that’s what Holly—the shade Holly—would have done, and I was just forced into behaving like her. That had to be what had happened. Surely I would never have thought to kiss him on my own.

It was bad enough that I had embarrassed myself, but I had done more than that. My new body had actually been stimulated by the kiss, and I had begun to feel the stirrings of what had to be horniness, and that was the last thing I wanted to feel right then.

To be completely truthful with myself, I had enjoyed the evening with Ray. Maybe over time, he’d become more traditionally masculine, looking down at women’s breasts instead of taking to their faces, and leaving the toilet seat up. But for now, he was an interesting blend of male strength and feminine sensitivity. I was strangely drawn to him—just as a friend, of course.

Still, I thought as I pulled off my bra and panties, he was a good looking guy. I hadn’t really noticed, but as I lay there in the darkness, I was softly caressing one of my breasts, feeling my nipple tingle. I felt an unexpected warmth between my legs too, and I caught the whiff of something I had only smelled on others before. Holy Mother of God, I was starting to get turned on.

Well, in for a penny, in for a pound and all that. I hesitantly put my fingers in the soft bush between my legs. That strange tingling seemed to spread over a significant part of my body. I pushed one finger—then two—into myself. It didn’t take long for things to build until like water spilling over a dam, I gasped out loud and felt the wonderful... unbelievably wonderful... sensation of my first climax as a woman.

Exhausted, I lay there limply letting the sensation slowly ebb on its own. It had been so enjoyable, lying there alone in the darkness after

pleasuring myself.

So why as I reached the crest of the sensation had I suddenly thought of Ray?

It was only my second morning waking up as a girl, and it was only moderately more comfortable than my first morning in this body. At least I hadn't awakened with the faint taste of someone's cum in my mouth. I had to block out some time today to get a new apartment, or Wally would be back from his camping trip tomorrow with lust in his eyes. And a blowjob, as disgusting as it had been, would be nothing compared to what he would demand from me next.

I put myself on automatic again, showering, then getting my hair out of a loose ponytail and putting on my makeup. I did take back control this time to tone down the makeup. Maybe Holly was expected to wear more makeup during the week, but on the weekend, I resolved to go for a more natural look. Maybe it wouldn't make me quite as alluring to the guys, but what did I care?

I still looked pretty good in a yellow tee and jeans. I don't think this body could have looked bad in anything. It felt good to wear sneakers, too. Two days of wearing heels had given me sore feet and ankles, and I wasn't sure how I'd be able to make it through an entire week balanced on them.

I was looking forward to my little research excursion with Ray. It's funny, but I had already accepted him as a man named Ray Garcia and not as a woman named Taylor. It was somehow easier to accept what had been done to him than to reconcile what had happened to me with my sense of self. Maybe the ones who lost their memories were the lucky ones. They at least didn't have to balance memories of a past life with the realities of a current one.

One of the worst things to balance, for me at least, was my growing attraction to Ray. It wasn't something I could just push away: it was almost as if my new body was programmed to be attracted to men in general and Ray in particular. Maybe it was. After all, I didn't just look

like a girl—I was a girl. That meant my hormones, brain patterns, and even my chromosomes were as female as any naturally-born girl's. Ray had at least been predisposed to an attraction to women. If I had been gay before, I might have been equally attracted to men more quickly, but instead, my body was having to teach my mind what it should like.

It's funny. I had never had a great deal of sympathy for gays before. That isn't to say I disliked them, but I just didn't think much about their situation. Like many people, I thought if they tried hard enough, they could overcome their 'aberration.' I even made fun of them and laughed at the anti-gay jokes. Now, as a woman, I was coming to understand that there was more to it than conscious choice. I was starting to become attracted to men whether I wanted to or not.

There was a sudden knock at the door, and just for a moment, I had the irrational fear that it was Wally at the door. I then realized it had to be Ray, and my fear evaporated, replaced by an unexplainable excitement.

He stood at the door with a white sack in his hand and a broad smile on his face. "Cinnamon rolls from Duke's," he announced proudly, like a hunter who had just returned with a fresh kill.

I could smell them through the sack. They did smell great. "Come in."

In a few minutes, we were sitting down to fresh coffee and some of the most delicious cinnamon rolls I had ever tasted. I'd have to watch it, though, I reminded myself. With this smaller body, too many cinnamon rolls and I'd be a tubby little thing. It was a distinctly feminine thought, I realized, wanting to stay slim enough to look good. I had been in reasonably decent shape in my male body though, and had always hated the thought of getting fat. That aberration appeared to have gone into hyperdrive with the acquisition of a female body.

"I'm going to try to guide you in your research today," Ray explained between bites. "Once you've discovered exactly who The Judge and his associates are, we can proceed any way you want to."

"Maybe after the library we could proceed to your office," I countered,

producing the flash drive from my purse.

“What’s that?”

“All of Aaron March’s document files,” I smiled devilishly.

“Why you sneaky little girl,” he said with obvious admiration. “This might turn out to be a worthwhile study after all.”

“You mean you didn’t think so before?” I asked, surprised.

He grinned. “Well... to be honest, I just wanted an excuse to see you again. I hope that doesn’t bother you...”

“Not really,” I admitted. “I think these new bodies are loaded with some sort of social imperative. They don’t force us to act like who we’ve become, but they do nudge us in that direction. I suppose if I’m going to be a girl, I might as well hang out with someone I like.”

We looked into each other’s eyes as the weight of what I had just said sunk in. We were obviously attracted to each other in ways probably neither of us could have fully understood. I think, in retrospect, that part of it was that when I was male, I had been very attracted to Taylor. In spite of her own sexual preferences, she must have been somewhat fascinated, if not attracted, to me. That mutual attraction had somehow been preserved after our transformations, and now, we were free of the baggage of our previous lives that had kept us apart. I don’t know if that’s the way it really was or not, but it seemed to make sense to both of us somehow.

Ray showed me around the library, giving me the nickel tour before stopping in front of a row of books. “Why are we stopping here?” I asked him.

“I thought you might want to start your research here,” he replied with mock innocence.

“‘Mythology and Folklore’? Why would I want to start here?”

He just smiled and sat down at a nearby table to read an economic journal he had brought along.

Without going into all the details, as well as my false starts, within little

more than an hour I had begun to understand where The Judge came from. At first, I refused to believe it. After all, to imagine that a group of old Greek or Roman gods had somehow plopped down in the heartland of America and created a town complete with all of its inhabitants was just a little too much. But the pieces fit together nicely: The Judge with his magical powers to reward and punish, the cop—Mercer—who seemed to be wherever he was needed almost instantly, the limping engineer—Eric Vulman—and last but not least, Aaron March. His first name resembled the Greek name of Ares, while his last name was ever so close to the Roman Mars. No wonder he paraded about almost like an army general, his aides trembling in his wake.

And as for his aides, Mr. Fobes must be Phobos, I realized, and Mr. Deimler must be his brother, Deimos. The two aides were associated with fear in the myths, but they seemed more the recipients of fear than the dispensers of it judging by what I had observed. But there was very little written about either of them, so maybe the myths were a little cockeyed.

It may seem strange that I bought into the idea so quickly, but having experienced the power of The Judge first hand, it wasn't exactly a leap of logic to realize that he was Jupiter—the most powerful of the Roman gods. But why was he wasting his time performing unwanted transformations on unwary travellers? If I could answer that question, I might be well on my way to recovering my rightful life.

“Okay,” I told Ray. “I understand now. The Judge is Ju... Ju...”

“Now you see why I couldn't just tell you,” he said. “Stop trying to say the word and you'll get your breath back.”

I nodded and gulped, feeling the air trickling down my throat again.

“So we can't say it?” I asked, not bothering to explain what “it” was.

“That's right,” he nodded. “At least we can't say it in that particular context. No one knows exactly why, but it's probably to prevent us from learning too much about them and how they operate. If we can't talk about them, we can't figure them out.”

“Or maybe we can,” I countered, waving the flash drive in my hand.

I could feel my heart beating faster as the files from the flash drive appeared on the screen of the computer in Ray’s office. I was afraid Aaron March would have encrypted the files and that my theft would be worthless. I was good, but cracking document encryption without some very sophisticated software tools would be a lost cause. Or maybe the files would be in Greek or Latin. After all, weren’t those the languages they originally spoke. Or worse yet—maybe they were in Greek and Latin and encrypted as well.

“Well, here goes,” I murmured, calling up the first document. To my relief, it loaded fine, but as for the content...

“It looks like a Chamber newspaper ad,” Ray commented.

“Well, there are a lot of files here, though,” I reminded him hopefully.

It wasn’t until we had painstakingly examined about a third of the files that we found anything interesting.

“It’s a memo to The Judge!” Ray exclaimed.

“Yeah, but it looks as if it’s responding to a memo from The Judge that isn’t included,” I pointed out. Silently, we read the memo:

To: The Judge

From: Aaron March

Subject: Suspected Leaks

Father—At your suggestion, I’ve taken personal charge of the investigation into the security leaks regarding our projects. As you know, Mr. Fobes found nothing to indicate that anyone outside our circle had any access to the Oracle. I can confirm that analysis. However, our opponents obviously have a source, since they have apparent knowledge of impending deaths of our resident candidates. I have checked with our sources at the second site and queried them regarding a heretofore unknown oracle, but I’ve come up empty. I apologize for my failure in this matter.

“Apparently everything isn’t going according to their plan,” Ray commented.

“It looks that way,” I agreed. “What is this ‘Oracle’ he refers to?”

Ray smiled. “You really never read much mythology, did you?”

I shrugged. “It didn’t seem to have much of a practical value.”

Ray ignored my remark and explained, “The Oracle of Delphi was the one most closely associated with the gods, although there were other oracles. March’s memo seems to indicate that there was really only one reliable oracle, though—probably the one at Delphi. Apparently they use the Oracle to determine who is about to die and lure them to Ovid as they did with us.”

So the explosives Officer Mercer discovered on our plane weren’t just planted there as an excuse to condemn us to these new lives. We really would have died if we hadn’t been brought to Ovid. In a way, rather than costing us our lives, The Judge had saved us. Sure, he could have left us as we were after he rescued us, but there was nothing in it for him if he did. I was starting to understand The Judge better and even appreciate his style. We had been left with a Hobson’s choice—die in a fiery explosion or assume new lives at The Judge’s whim.

“Let’s keep going,” Ray urged.

Sometime later, just by reading March’s correspondence, we had pieced together a significant amount of information about the activities of the gods. Apparently, the Oracle had predicted a major crisis in the Middle East, resulting in a nuclear war between the Moslem part of the world and the Western powers. References to the obliteration of nearly every city in the Middle East and not just a few in Europe and America made it clear that there had not been any true winners in the conflict. As the combatants reeled, other ‘neutral’ nations, such as Russia and China, hurried to make their own claims on the remaining oil fields, touching off a second round of nuclear warfare. The end result was a dying planet—something apparently even the gods feared.

“It reads like science fiction,” Ray said quietly.

“Well, it is in the future,” I allowed, “but from the memos, it looks as if it might happen anywhere from five to fifty years out, depending upon additional factors.”

“Yeah,” Ray agreed. “The greater the pressure for more oil, the quicker it happens. But some of the documents say that the gods have perfected an engine that can run efficiently without oil right here in Ovid.”

“Vulman Industries,” I remarked.

“I think you’re right,” was Ray’s thoughtful response. “They’re the biggest company in town, they have access to classified documents through their defense contracts, and they’ve apparently been hiring engineers like crazy. If they’ve developed such an engine, the need for oil will go down overnight.”

“The Oracle has predicted war if oil is scarce, the war will happen very soon. But it looks as if there will be war even if oil isn’t scarce: it just takes longer for it to happen. Why is that?” I asked.

I could suddenly imagine Ray standing before a classroom, for in a heartbeat, he was wearing his economics professor’s guise. “We use oil for many things besides fueling cars and power plants. It’s used as a lubricant and in the production of many products, such as plastics. Plus even if an engine such as these documents portray came into the marketplace, it would take a few years to replace existing engines. As a result, there would still be a high demand for oil for some time. Prices might fall, but it would be gradual at first.

“In the Middle East, many nations have gone along for decades assuming that they could sell oil in massive quantities forever and never have to join the rest of the world in development of advanced economies. Instead of investing prudently in their nations’ futures, they have squandered the money with yachts, indoor ski slopes, and other useless toys.

“If oil is no longer needed on a large scale, governments will become

cash poor and be overthrown when they can no longer provide an easy living for their people. Then religious radical elements may rise in any number of nations to take control. The West will be the enemy as far as these radicals are concerned, and to make a long story short, they will eventually trigger a religious war as devastating as the one which would have developed early over securing the sources of oil."

He was right, I realized.

"So it's damned if we do and damned if we don't," I sighed. "If we don't do something to radically drop oil consumption, a war over oil will develop. But if we do find a way to cut oil consumption, we'll see our trading partners in the Middle East replaced by religious zealots who will start a religious war."

Ray nodded. "In a nutshell, that's it."

I looked at my watch. It was hard to read the tiny face of my women's watch, so I hadn't glanced down at it as I often did as a man. To my alarm, I saw it was nearly four o'clock. "Oh shit!" I exclaimed. "I need to find an apartment."

Ray looked confused. "But you have an apartment."

"Not really," I admitted. I had been too embarrassed to explain to Ray my problems with my 'boyfriend.' Obviously, he knew I had one, since he had seen enough evidence of that in the stuff Wally had left strewn about the apartment, but he had been too much of a gentleman to ask any embarrassing questions. Reluctantly, I told him the whole story.

Ray shook his head. "Boy, The Judge really did a number on you."

"Tell me about it," I sighed. "Now you see why I have to get cracking on finding a new apartment—before he gets back from his camping trip." I shuddered at the thought of him coming back from his outing, dirty, full of beer, and so horny he would jump me on the living room floor. I cringed at the thought.

Ray looked concerned. "I know his type," he said, looking almost as if he had read my mind and seen the same disgusting image. "You're right to get out of there. Holly was probably too weak to get out of a

bad relationship. If you'd really lost your memories, you'd probably be the same way. But the way you are now, things could get ugly pretty fast."

"Will you help me find an apartment?" I asked hopefully.

"Sure, but it's too late to do anything about it now. Apartments are scarce in Ovid with Vulman hiring so many new people. We can look tomorrow, though."

"Tomorrow will be too late," I cried. "What if Wally comes home early? I need to get something before that happens."

"Well..." Ray began slowly, "you could move in with me."

"What?"

"Look, don't get all excited," he soothed. "I'm just talking about something temporary—until we can find you a new place. I'm just a friend trying to help a friend, okay?"

"But..."

"Let's go back to your place," he urged. "We'll get some stuff packed up for you and get it over to my place. Tomorrow, we go looking for an apartment for you. Then I'll go with you to gather the rest of your things—to protect you from Wally."

The more I thought about it, it was the best plan available to me. Saturday night wasn't a good time to go apartment hunting, and Sunday would be too late. I didn't think I had anything to fear from Ray. He had already had ample opportunity to jump me if that had been his intention. Besides, he had been a girl recently, and I could tell he really empathized with me. His offer was one a girl might make to her friend to help her escape from a bad situation.

While Ray was still thinking like a girl in some ways, I didn't have the luxury of thinking like a man any longer. I was just a weak girl, and while a man wouldn't flee his roommate during the night, a girl might have no choice. Wally wasn't a big bruiser by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, he was shorter and probably not in as good a shape as Ray, but he was still bigger and stronger than me. I was

forced to think like the girl I had become and realize that if Wally found out I was leaving him, he might be pissed enough to become violent. The potential was certainly there.

I nodded. "Okay, let's get my stuff."

As Holly, I had woefully little stuff to get, I realized. Nothing in the apartment looked much like what Holly would own, except for toiletries and clothing. I hadn't been paid yet, so I didn't know how much Holly made, but either it wasn't enough to afford the little niceties of life or Wally was taking whatever she made and doling it out. From what I had seen of both my job and of Wally, it was probably a combination of the two. It only took us about half an hour to clean all of my belongings out of the apartment and stuff them haphazardly in my little Saturn.

It was funny, I mused. A couple of days ago, I owned enough things to fill a string of moving vans. I had a beautiful home near Seattle, a beachfront home in Maui, and an apartment in London, all opulently furnished by professional decorators. My closets had been filled with expensive suits and casual clothing, and my garage had been filled with a virtual fleet of expensive cars. Now, all of my belongings—mostly clothing and a few mementos, including pictures of a family I had never actually met—fit comfortably inside my only car, a nondescript Saturn.

I suddenly felt very sorry for myself standing there in the late afternoon shade. Something was welling up inside of me—something I hadn't felt in years. My chest shuddered and I heaved air with a weak cry as warm tears burst from my eyes. I was a shuddering, pathetic little thing, standing before the pitiful possessions I now had, heaving spasmodically as the tears seemed to be streaming down my face.

"It's okay, Holly," Ray said soothingly as he stood behind me. He put his arms around me to comfort me. Looking back on it, maybe I should have been concerned at such an intimate act, but I truly needed him to put his arms around me.

I swung about until I was facing him, his arms now wrapped around

my back. I buried my face in his chest, my tears mixed with makeup staining the front of his shirt. He didn't seem to mind. "I'm here for you, Holly," he said softly, and that made me feel better.

I felt like such a little fool. In my former life, I had kept a box of tissues around for crying secretaries and even a woman manager or two. I had always been just a little disgusted with their conduct, wondering why they couldn't just suck it up and take it like men did. Of course I was looking at it from the perspective of a man who had become rich and powerful. I had always been in charge of my life before, and I suppose I just didn't realize how many people—especially women, it seemed—felt powerless. No, they didn't just feel powerless: they were powerless.

That made me feel even worse to realize I was one of those women now. Here I was, all my belongings in the car, a low-level admin job, and a boyfriend who would probably want to slap me around once he found out I had walked out on him. And as bad as my job was, I needed it. There was no *Malone Software* for me to go back to. Even if there were and I could somehow miraculously escape Ovid, who would believe me? While Mr. March's document file had proven useful for finding out more about what was going on in Ovid, I had found nothing I could take to The Judge to bargain for my restoration and release from Ovid. I was stuck here, at the whim of the gods.

In spite of feeling so sorry for myself, my crying had been reduced to an occasional whimper. It just felt so good to have someone there to hold me. What must Ray think of me? As Taylor, she had been a strong woman. Taylor would never have broken down in my arms. Here I was—a little helpless nothing of a secretary acting so girly it seemed unreal. "I... I'm sorry," I murmured, still holding onto Ray.

He looked down at me and shook his head. "Nothing to be sorry about. When I was a girl, I broke down a couple of times, too."

"You?" I blurted out incredulously.

"Sure, all girls do," he assured me. "I guess it really is the hormones."

Oh yeah, I had those now, didn't I? Feminine ones I mean. Plus I had

all the other feminine stuff, too—vagina, clitoris, ovaries... Ovaries? Shit! I could get pregnant. That was horrible. And I would have periods. That was horrible, too. Shit!

“Let’s get you home,” he said softly, giving me one last welcome squeeze.

Ray’s apartment was a typical man’s apartment—leather couch, big screen TV, computer, expensive stereo, wine rack—the works. I wondered if he missed the little feminine touches he probably enjoyed as Taylor. If so, he didn’t let on.

“Put your stuff in the bedroom,” he told me. When he saw the expression on my face, he grinned. “Don’t worry. I’ll take the couch. We will have to share a bathroom though: there’s only one.”

He took his own load of my clothing and placed it carefully on the bed. I followed his example. It only took a few trips to get everything.

“I’ll help you get everything hung up and in drawers after dinner,” he said. “Do you want to go out to eat?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I’m something of a mess. So are you, for that matter. I’m sorry, but I got some makeup on your shirt.”

He looked down. “So you did. No problem, though. I can whip us up a decent chef’s salad, and there’s a bottle of white wine in the fridge. Sound good?”

I smiled. “Sounds great. I’ll help you make it.”

I hadn’t prepared a meal since I had become wealthy enough to afford a personal chef. I suppose I should be honest and say Ray prepared the meal while I just helped, but it gave me an odd sense of satisfaction I hadn’t felt in some time.

Come to think of it, I really hadn’t prepared much of anything in a long, long time. Once I had developed the basis of what would someday become *Be-All*, I really hadn’t done anything particularly creative. Oh sure, I had built a business empire that had propelled me to the covers of every major business and news magazine in the world, but much of that building had been the work of my staffs. I had just been the front

man. Sure, I owned enough of the stock to guarantee me virtual control of the company, but I hadn't really been hands-on in some time. At least not until *Metamorph* came about.

The rise of *Metamorph* was what had gotten me off my ass. I was so pissed that anyone would dare to challenge me with a competing product that I put my play toys—my sailboat, my polo ponies, and my San Francisco penthouse love nest—aside to prove to everyone, including myself, that I could handle this challenge myself.

Yeah, I had handled it all right. My lawyers told me I was in danger of being charged with restraint of trade, my staff in Miami had lost focus to follow my directions on stopping *Metamorph*, and *Metamorph's* backers in organized crime had nearly blown up me and my staff six miles up in the air.

If I were still in my own body, I would have found a way to rationalize all of these failings away, but in the body of a helpless nineteen-year-old girl, it was somewhat easier to recognize my inadequacies. Because of me, lives had been ruined, opportunities wasted, and in the end, everything I had ever worked for had been lost and forgotten. *Be-All* had never existed. Of course, since *Metamorph* had been developed from *Be-All*, it probably didn't exist either. That was the one bright spot in all of this, I thought grimly.

Now, here I was on another potential fool's errand, attempting to get enough information to blackmail a god into changing me back into the man I used to be and allowing me to fuck things up all over again. Maybe I was wasting my time. Maybe I should just settle back, be a good little secretary, screw Wally's brains out, and be happy with my lot.

"Careful!"

Ray's warning brought me out of my funk. "What?"

"You almost sliced your finger along with that carrot," he pointed out as he deftly inserted a corkscrew into a bottle of white table wine.

"Oh!" I looked down to see the knife resting sharp edge down on the

chopping board a hair's distance from the tip of my finger. "I guess I just got lost in thought."

"So what were you thinking about?"

I sighed, "I was just thinking about how all of this is my fault."

"That doesn't sound like the Franklin Malone I knew," he observed.

"In case you hadn't noticed, I don't seem to be Franklin Malone right now."

"I noticed." There was something strange about the way he said that, but I let it go.

"I think The Judge changes more than our bodies," I mused. "Maybe there's something he does to us that's buried down deeper—to keep us from going crazy with all of these changes. In my case, maybe it took away some of my self-confidence and forced me to see things differently."

He poured me a glass of wine and handed it to me. "Maybe it wasn't the self-confidence he took," Ray suggested. "Maybe it was more the bravado—the macho instincts you used to have."

"And I don't have them now?"

He shook his head. "Not a trace. In fact, I think it's an improvement. Franklin Malone was an 'in your face' sort of guy. It masked a man who was very intelligent and very vulnerable."

"You thought that about me?" I asked incredulously.

"Not exactly," he replied, taking a sip of wine. "That's what I see now—now that all those negative aspects have been stripped away. Before Ovid, I just thought you were a self-centered son of a bitch."

In spite of myself, I giggled, masking it as best I could by taking a sip of what turned out to be a very nice white wine.

We talked more over dinner, mostly about our previous lives. We had started out trying to discuss the gods, but for some reason, we were unable to discuss them without choking up—apparently more of their

magic. So we stuck mostly to our former lives. I told Ray about growing up with my aunt and uncle, while he told me about his (her at the time, of course) childhood back in a suburb of Chicago.

“Do you miss your family?” I asked, intrigued that Taylor had enjoyed a much happier upbringing with her brother and two sisters.

“Sure,” he acknowledged, “but everyone was starting to get a little uptight about my being a lesbian. It was as if they expected me to grow out of it or something. I think we had some real conflicts coming up if I had remained Taylor, so maybe it’s for the best. How about you?”

“My aunt and uncle might as well be dead,” I told her bluntly, reaching for the wine bottle. Empty.

“I’ll open more,” Ray suggested.

I shook my head. “No, I’d better stop. I’m not as big as I was, and I think this wine has gone to my head.” I rose unsteadily, as if to prove a point. “Let’s get cleaned up and then I’m...”

I was going to say I would then go to bed, but I snagged my foot on the chair and stumbled. Ray jumped up quickly and caught me or I would have been sprawled all over the floor.

“I’m okay,” I insisted, but I wasn’t. I was just a little wobbly—definitely too much wine. Coupled with the light dinner we had enjoyed, I was more than a little inebriated.

“I’ll clean up,” Ray volunteered. “You go ahead and get some sleep.”

He had his arm around me to keep me from falling, and to be honest, his arm felt good. Just as when I had been crying and he had comforted me, I felt strangely safe when his arm was around me. In fact, I felt so safe, I felt he deserved a little reward. As we entered the bedroom, I stood on my toes and kissed his cheek.

Ray looked surprised but pleased. “What was that for?”

“For being so nice to me.” I smiled as I looked into his eyes.

“Let’s get you ready for bed,” he said, changing the subject. He looked

through the stuff I had thrown in an empty drawer and selected a short but opaque lime-green nightgown. "Can you get this on?"

"I sleep in the nude," I informed him with a little bit of a wicked grin.

"Oh... well, maybe that was just what Wally expected. Otherwise, why would you even have any nightgowns? Try this on."

I took in and fumbled with it, trying to figure out what the best way would be to put it on. "You wanna help me?" I slurred.

"I..."

"Come on, you used to be a girl. I haven't got anything you haven't got. Or used to got. Or used to have." I giggled.

"Okay," he sighed. "Maybe I'd better help you."

He peeled off my clothes, and I found myself enjoying the experience. I kept rubbing up against him—accidentally of course. In my wine-soaked mind, I thought of what I was doing to him as something of a little practical joke, making him, I'm sure, hard as a rock. The joke was backfiring, though, because I was starting to get turned on myself.

Turned on! How could that be? I was a man, just taking up temporary residence in a woman's body. No, that wasn't right. We had decided we were probably stuck as we were, but I was still a man inside my mind. So why was I feeling so... funny, standing there in front of him with all of my clothes in a little heap at my feet?

"Here, get this on." He propped me up with one hand while his other hand slipped the nightgown over my head. It felt sort of good, really. Once he had it arranged properly, he guided me over to the bed and slipped me under the covers.

"What? No good night kiss?" I mumbled.

Without a reply, he leaned over and kissed me gently on the forehead. "Good night, Holly."

I smiled as I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning started with a dull headache. I was going to have to remember that this new, smaller body lacked the capacity to drink as much as my old one. I didn't feel awful, but I didn't exactly feel good, either. On top of that, the wine had reduced my judgment level to the point at which I had almost started to come on to Ray. Okay, to be completely honest, I had started coming on to Ray.

I slipped on a light lime-green robe that matched my nightgown and peeked out the bedroom door, expecting Ray to be either stirring or still asleep on the couch. Instead, the room was empty. He had left a note pinned to the back of the front door, explaining that he had accidentally left some papers at the office and needed to retrieve them. Checking my watch, I saw that according to the time on the note, he had only left a few minutes earlier. Come to think of it, the closing of the front door was what had awakened me.

I had slept a long, long time. It was already ten thirty. What time had we gone to bed the night before? I wasn't sure, but it hadn't been that late. I guess being transformed had taken a lot out of me—that and the wine.

Figuring it would be awhile before Ray got back, I decided to take a shower. Ray had a nice shower—one of those massaging types. It made my body feel good, so naturally, I got a little curious. Once my back had been soothed by the pulsing waters, I turned to face the shower, letting the water cascade down over my breasts. That felt pretty good, too, I admitted to myself.

Now I don't want it to sound like I was standing there under the water, undulating sexily and moaning as my breasts tingled and my nipples got hard like in some sort of cheap porn film, but it did feel good... I stepped back a little so the pulsing water could get between my legs. Again, the feeling was pleasant, but not exactly mind-blowing.

Frankly, I was interested in exactly what mind-blowing would be like in this body.

Sure, it sounds a little kinky, but I challenge anyone with a normal amount of curiosity who managed to get an unwanted sex change to

avoid trying to find out just what it felt like to get off as the opposite sex. The thought was both intriguing and frightening. Fortunately, intrigue finally won out over fear.

Hesitantly, I touched my nipples. They were very, very sensitive, and the sensation was very relaxing. One hand still working on the nipples, alternating between both of them, I tentatively place my other hand between my legs. As a man, I had done this to women hundreds of times, but doing it to myself was something else again. The sensations lacked the intensity of male masturbation, but they were more far-reaching, radiating all through my body.

I closed my eyes as I worked on myself, and unbidden, I suddenly wondered what it would be like to have someone else do this to me. Ray's image then flashed into my head, and I was unable to avoid the image of me lying on a bed while Ray did this to me. I shuddered, little waves of pleasure rippling through my body. Was that an orgasm? Yes, I realized, it was. And it felt good...

I dressed in a simple white cami top and a pair of denim shorts, putting my hair in a ponytail while on automatic and applying a light coat of makeup. I didn't bother with shoes as I admired myself in the mirror. Getting off had actually made me feel good in this female body, and although I told myself I would have gladly traded it for my old life, I vowed to make the most of the hand I had been dealt. The girl in the mirror looked younger than nineteen, with her ponytail and girl-next-door makeup. While the cami and the shorts did little to hide some very womanly charms, I thought I looked good. I thought Ray would think I looked good, too.

Ray just seemed to be jumping to the forefront of my thoughts, I realized. I was already thinking of him as if he had always been a man. There was no doubt I was feeling a definite attraction to him. It couldn't be helped, I realized. This body had been wired to like men, and Ray had always preferred women, even when he was one. Add to that our common bond as unwilling residents of Ovid, then throw in a dash of good old-fashioned pheromones, and the attraction was almost unavoidable.

If I ever got back to my old life, I would probably be sickened by this rationalization, but residing in the body of a young woman with normal sexual urges, it made perfect sense.

I decided to set the mood by making a nice breakfast for Ray. My headache was receding, compliments of a couple of Excedrin, and I was feeling ambitious. While I wasn't much of a cook, I knew I at least had the ability to make up some scrambled eggs and fry up some bacon. I had already made coffee, so how hard could it be?

The bacon was snapping and popping merrily as the doorbell rang. I naturally assumed it was Ray returning, perhaps having forgotten his key. Who else would it be late on a Sunday morning? I cheerfully threw open the door, forgetting that I was now smaller and female and should never open a door without checking to see who it was.

Unfortunately, it wasn't Ray.

It was Wally.

He was dressed in clothes so scruffy and dirty that he had to have been in them all weekend. The scruffy, rough clothing and the two-day growth of beard made him look more like a derelict than anything else. Added to that was the fiery look in his eyes and the way he was clenching and unclenching his fists, and I knew I was in big, big trouble.

In that moment in which our eyes met, I tried to think of something I could say to get that terrible scowl off his face. I wouldn't have been able to do it, though, even if he hadn't backhanded me, knocking me to the ground. He might have been a shade, but his arm was strong. I just lay there on the ground, looking up at him in shock.

"Bitch!" he screamed.

"Wally, I..."

"Move out on me, will you?"

I scooted back on my ass, fearfully trying to get some distance between me and my assailant. I was afraid when I saw his leg twitch that he was going to kick me. In those heavy work boots he was

wearing, a solid hit was bound to result in a broken bone wherever he connected. He didn't kick me, though. Instead, he leaned over and grabbed the front of my top, ripping it at he pulled me to my feet.

"Nobody walks out on me, you dumb cunt!" His breath was foul with whiskey and beer fumes. Apparently he and his cronies had come back into town, drinking all the way.

"Who are you?" an angry voice came from the doorway. It was Ray. Oh my God, if Wally was worked up enough to do this to me, he'd probably kill Ray.

"Get the police!" I managed to call out to Ray, hoping he would turn and get help before Wally pounced on him. My warning earned me an unpleasant rap on the jaw.

I turned away, expecting yet another blow when suddenly, his strong hand released me, causing me to tumble to the ground once more. I didn't see what happened next, but I heard it. It sounded like crockery being slammed against a wall, and before I knew what was happening, Wally was on the floor next to me, holding his nose as something red and slightly transparent flowed between his fingers.

"You broke my fucking nose!" he screamed in a comically nasal tone.

"That's because your 'fucking nose' was where it didn't belong," Ray replied calmly, but with obvious distaste.

Wally got to his feet surprisingly fast. He ignored the blood flowing from his nose and took an ill-timed swing at Ray. Ray blocked it easily and rammed a fist into my assailant's solar plexus. The wind forced out of him, he crumpled to the ground, this time electing to stay there.

Officer Mercer was now standing in the doorway. I had no idea how he knew to come, but I suspected my screams had been heard by one of Ray's neighbors and they had called the police. The entire incident had taken less than five minutes, so his promptness would have been unimaginable to anyone who didn't know him to be Mercury. The God dragged the defeated man to his feet. "Are you two all right?" he asked Ray and me.

Ray turned to me. "Are you okay?"

"I am... now," I told him, trying to ignore my sore jaw, stinging cheek, and bruised ass. For the first time since my transformation, I was happy my ass was now well padded. I tried to smile for my hero, but it hurt too much to manage it.

"You might want to have that jaw looked at," Officer Mercer recommended before leading his prisoner off.

Once he had left, closing the door behind him, I rushed to Ray's open arms, sobbing hard. It seemed to be turning into a habit—me crying and Ray holding me in a comforting embrace.

Ray took me by the hospital to be checked over. Luckily, the damage was limited to a few bruises—nothing I couldn't fix with makeup, the nurse told me. She shot an evil glance over her shoulder at Ray who was waiting in the next room, watching me through the glass partition.

"You should take him to see The Judge," she advised me.

"Oh! No, Ray didn't do this. He stopped the guy who did this."

"Then that guy should be taken to see The Judge," she amended.

I wondered if that would do any good. Since Wally was a shade, what could The Judge do to him? As I understood it, shades were just elaborate placeholders, eventually replaced by real people. I did pity the person who got to be Wally, though.

"Say," I said suddenly to the nurse, "if you know about The Judge, then you remember who you were before?" I didn't expect to see the nurse anytime soon, so I didn't worry about letting her know I had my memories, too.

"Sure do," she grinned. "I'm Sarah Locke, by the way. I used to be an MD. Most of the nurses here were doctors, by the way. I guess this is The Judge's way of getting even with us, by making us nurses here in Ovid."

"Getting even?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "You know—sort of like being reduced from

master to slave. At least that's how some doctors would feel about it. We nurses get ordered around by docs who know less about patient needs than we do. It's a bit of a shock to end up lower on the totem pole."

"You seem to have adapted," I pointed out.

"Well, I didn't have to put up with the sex change," she confided. "I was female before, but several of the other nurses here used to be male doctors. Those who remember their past lives usually have a difficult time adapting."

"I can imagine," I muttered, knowing exactly how they felt. It wasn't taking me very long to understand that my previous chauvinistic attitudes were being reflected back at me now. Aaron March and his two lackeys thought of me as someone to bring them coffee and smile prettily. Wally had thought of me as his own personal property. O'Hara was happy to bully a poor, weak little girl. And as for the rest of the men I had seen in Ovid, they seemed to delight in alternating their looks between my legs and my breasts. Ray was the only man in town who had treated me as a human being, and he was a former woman.

"Take these," Sarah said, ushering me out to the lobby where Ray was waiting patiently for me. "They're just Advil, but they should help with any pain."

"You're all right?" Ray asked as I swallowed the pills and took the glass of water Sarah had drawn for me.

"I'll be fine," I told him. "I'll just be a little sore."

"I hear you stopped the punk who did this," Sarah said to Ray. "Good work."

Ray grinned. "Thanks. It was a pleasure." Then he put a protective arm around me and led me out to his car.

"Officer Mercer called me on my cell while you were in there," Ray told me.

"Cell phones work here?" I asked hopefully.

“Only locally,” he replied, crushing my hopes of finding some way to communicate with the outside world. “Anyhow, he told me The Judge had issued a restraining order against Wally. He won’t be bothering you anymore.”

Something told me the restraining order wasn’t like the wimpy ones judges issued outside of Ovid. In all likelihood, violating the restraining order would prove very troublesome to Wally. I breathed an audible sigh of relief.

“I picked something up for you at the office,” Ray went on. “The college has some laptops for checkout. I picked one up so you could continue your examination of the document files at my place.”

“That’s great,” I smiled. “But I saw a computer back at your apartment. And based on what we found yesterday, I don’t know how much good it will do.”

“True,” he acknowledged, “but as I understand it, you want to find some information you can use to trade with The Judge—information for a ticket out of Ovid.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Then you may have other computers to check out. This one is faster than mine and it’s portable. Keep it with you all the time. It will make your search go faster. Also, there’s no Wi-Fi here in Ovid, so nobody can tap into this computer. I’ve got the laptop for a week, so no problems.”

He was right. I could store everything on the drive of the laptop and have all the data whenever I needed it. It was a shame *Be-All* didn’t exist anymore. It would have helped me merge the data more quickly. Still, Ray’s procurement of the laptop would speed things up and keep me from having to use computers which could be easily hacked.

Back at Ray’s place, we ate a quick breakfast—which Ray fixed—and I was back in business with the laptop on the kitchen table while Ray read the Sunday *Tulsa World*. My search wasn’t producing the results I had hoped for, though. While the latest documents I examined shed

a little more light on the plans of the gods, there was nothing there I could use to negotiate with The Judge for my freedom.

It was midway through the afternoon that I finally discovered something that might be useful. It figured—I had already gone through nearly eighty percent of the files. Still, I was happy finally to discover something. “I found something interesting,” I called out to Ray, who was by now watching a baseball game on his widescreen. He was really getting into this male thing in a big way.

“What’s that?” he asked, leaving the game to look over my shoulder. Maybe he wasn’t completely into the male thing after all. Most men (including the former me) would have just called an irritated “What?” while never missing a pitch.

“March is really worried about security,” I explained, pointing at a scathing memo he had written to Fobes demanding to know how information about Ovid had leaked to the NSA. From the sound of the memo, the breach had been extremely serious.

“NSA, huh?” Ray commented. “That’s heavy stuff. It also means our government isn’t in on whatever is going on here.”

I turned and looked at him seriously. “Did you think they were?”

He shrugged. “It was always a possibility. After all, it’s pretty bizarre to think about all of this going on right here in our country without the government being a part of it. From the looks of the memo, though, the security breach was sealed when this person codenamed ‘Ice Queen’ was removed from power.”

I reread the same passage he was looking at. “Yeah. But it looks like the ‘Ice Queen’ was actually a woman. I don’t remember any woman being in charge of the NSA: do you?”

“No, but if The Judge can erase our lives from the collective memory, maybe this ‘Ice Queen’ was erased, too.”

It was a sobering reminder to realize The Judge had the power to erase us from reality. If he knew what we were up to, he might erase us entirely and not just our identities. While I wasn’t excited about

being a woman, I was realistic enough to know it was better than not existing at all. Personally, I for one, did not think I'd be better off dead than being female.

"March directed Fobes to look into it and report back to him through Mr. Deimler when he had finished." I scanned forward through the document file but could find nothing else that dealt with the security issue—at least from the file name. "Damn!" I exclaimed. "I'd sure like to see Fobes' reply to that memo."

"It's probably on Fobes' computer," Ray speculated, causing me to realize I was going to have to raid another computer to get my answers. Ray looked at his watch. "Hey, it's two o'clock. Did you still want to look at apartments?"

"I suppose I should," I replied, shutting down the laptop. "I don't want to impose upon you any more than I have to."

"Oh, it's no imposition," he was quick to tell me.

"What are people going to say when they find out you've got a young blonde bimbo living with you?" I pointed out.

Ray just grinned. "They'd probably just say, 'Lucky dog!'"

Since Ovid was a small town, searching for an apartment didn't take long as there were few places to search. Unlike cities with their large apartment complexes, an apartment building in Ovid with twelve units was considered large. The growth of Vulman Industries and the fall session at Capta College meant that nearly every apartment was occupied, the few exceptions being out of my price range.

Again, the irony wasn't lost on me. In my former life, price would not have been a problem, but my meagre earnings at the Chamber were insufficient to rent anything but the most modest apartment—none of those seemed to be available. Maybe part of the reason Holly had moved in with Wally was the state of her finances. It certainly wasn't for his sparkling personality.

"You can stay with me as long as you want," Ray soothed me as I seemed on the verge of tears once again. We were just getting back

into the car after coming up completely dry at every apartment building in town.

“That couch of yours is going to be pretty uncomfortable after a few days,” I pointed out. I nearly bit my tongue as I realized that what I had said could have been viewed as a come-on. If I were still a man and some pretty girl had said that to me, I would have twisted it into an invitation to join her in bed.

Fortunately, Ray hadn’t been a man all that long. “I don’t mind,” he replied with a boyish smile.

I stared at him for a moment as he started the car. I had seen that look before, but not directed at me. It was that puppy dog look of love guys got when they gazed into the eyes of the women they loved. Did Ray think he was in love with me? He had only been a man for a few days, and yet he thought he was in love with me?

Then I remembered that as Taylor, he had been a lesbian. Falling for a girl would be second nature to him. But what made him think I would reciprocate his love? Until a few days ago, I had been a man with absolutely no interest in other men. Even if I had leaned that way, my experiences as a woman with Wally would have turned me off men in a hurry.

And yet...

I thought about the women I had seen since my transformation. My co-worker Karen, was very attractive, and yet I felt no attraction to her or to any of the women I had met or seen since my transformation. I tried, just as an experiment, to imagine myself in bed with Karen, our breasts rubbing against each other while I penetrated her—I suppose with a strap-on—but the fantasy did nothing for me. That was odd...

Then my mind strayed to the obvious next step. I tried to imagine myself in bed with Ray. I thought about his hands caressing my breasts and felt an odd little sensation in my nipples. Then I tried to imagine falling back onto the sheets, my legs spread while he... while he...

I was getting very moist. I could feel it happening. As a male, I would have felt the blood rushing into my penis, stiffening it and increasing its sensitivity as it pushed against a wall of clothing. The sensation I felt was the same and different all at once. Obviously, there was no hardening to speak of, but the spot where I knew my clitoris lay felt as if it had expanded. The most overwhelming sensation was a warmth and a yielding sensation between my legs, as if my body was preparing for...

"Are you all right?"

"Huh?" My eyes darted to Ray, and I realized the car was stopped.

"You had sort of a glazed look," Ray explained. "We're home and yet you looked as if you were a million miles away."

"Oh... I'm fine," I lied. "I was just... just thinking." That said, I rushed out of the car, barely able to contain myself as I waited for Ray to open the door. No, I wasn't about to jump him, but I needed relief and needed it fast.

"Are you okay in there?" Ray called at the bathroom door.

"I'm fine!" I called back, hoping I hadn't made too much noise when I came.

"If you need help, I know enough about being a woman that I can answer any questions you have."

Well, it was a little late for questions. I had rushed into the apartment, grabbed a new set of panties from the drawer, and shot into the bathroom as fast as I could. I had intended to just change out of my damp panties, but the urges I had been feeling would not be contained by just a fresh pair of panties. I had no idea exactly how women pleased themselves, but I had managed in the shower and I was managing now. To be honest, I seemed to be getting even better at it. Apparently it didn't take me long to learn. After my body had finished shuddering with pleasure, I was too exhausted to move from the toilet where I had collapsed.

"It's just..." I began, trying to think of something less embarrassing to

tell Ray than that I had just gotten myself off. “It’s just that my bladder seems so much smaller than when I was a man.” I didn’t know if that was true or not, but women complained about that all the time. It sounded like a good excuse anyway. “I’m okay now.”

“Well, call me if you need anything.”

I sighed in relief. He had bought it. Or at least I thought he had. I really couldn’t be certain.

When I had straightened myself up, including freshening my makeup while on automatic, I was ready to face the world again—or at least that small portion of the world that included Ray. I tried to compose myself and act like nothing had happened, but something most certainly had happened. In the last few hours, I had become less horrified about my new existence and more curious. Getting myself off twice since my transformation had opened a new door in my psyche.

I, of course, knew what sex as a man was like, but now that I had crossed a psychological hurdle by climaxing two times as a woman, I couldn’t help but wonder what sex with a man—one man in particular would be like. I had no doubt that Ray would be a sensitive and skilled lover. As a former woman, and a former lesbian, he would know what it took to please a woman. I, as a former man, had never had to please a man before, but I knew what I had liked and that was probably enough to please him.

Wait a minute... what was I thinking? I was still a man inside, and I still had a chance of getting out of Ovid if I could find something to offer The Judge in return for my freedom.

But I had to consider that my chances were slim. I still needed to check out my boss’s computer, but after that, I was pretty much out of ideas. It wasn’t likely a lowly receptionist was going to be privy to anything The Judge didn’t already know, unless it was what color lipstick went with what nail polish. And if I had to live my life as a girl, I had to consider my future. There were a lot of Wallys out there. For all practical purposes, I admitted reluctantly to myself, I had been one of them. How many Rays were out there? Not many, I suspected.

Could I really do that, though—act the part of Ray’s girlfriend? It would certainly solve a lot of problems. I’d have a place to live, more financial security, and other men would leave me alone. It suddenly struck me that this was probably what many women thought about when agreeing to a relationship. Holly had probably thought about it herself before moving in with Wally. Come to think of it, maybe Wally was a decent guy once upon a time, and maybe he changed over time.

But what would change him into such an asshole? I had to let the male side of my brain think about that, and it didn’t take me long to think of an answer. When I was after a woman, I was generally polite and sensitive to her needs. But once I had the woman in my power, it was a different story until finally I took her for granted. I had enjoyed several ‘serious’ relationships with women, but all of them had ended the same way, with her moving out. Not even my money was enough to keep the good ones. As for the gold-diggers, I’d keep them around, but at arm’s length, only seeing them when I needed something from them—almost always that ‘something’ was sex.

Now the shoe was on the other foot, and a dainty little foot it was, too. Maybe it was best to leave things with Ray where they were—just friends. We were both new at the game of love after shifting teams, so there was no sense in complicating our relationship. Just living together until I could find a place would be problem enough.

“You want to go out to eat tonight?” he asked me when I finally rejoined him.

“You don’t have to entertain me,” I told him. “We can just whip up something simple here.”

So that’s what we did. We made tomato soup (fresh out of the can) and grilled cheese sandwiches—about as domestic a combination as I could think of. Then we just puttered around for a while, taking a short walk in the unseasonably warm (so we were told) October twilight. It was dark by the time we started walking back, and I was shivering a little, since I had elected not to take a jacket. Ray didn’t have one either, so he put his arm around me and held me closely as we

walked. His warmth felt nice.

Once back at his apartment, things just sort of... happened.

We hadn't talked much on the walk, limiting our conversation to things like, "Nice evening isn't it?" and yes and no responses. I think it was because we were both thinking the same things from our new perspectives. I could tell from the way Ray had put his arm around me during the walk that he was falling in love with me. I might not have been a girl very long, but I could tell. His touch was gentle and respectful, but at the same time possessive, as if he wanted to hold me and never let go. Strangely, I didn't want him to let go, and it wasn't just for the warmth.

I even rested my arm on his strong shoulder, and as big and manly as that shoulder was, it felt as comfortable as the softest down pillow to me. My body was responding to his touch, even while the male side of my mind argued that it was wrong to even be considering what I had been thinking. I realized, though, that this body needed something it wasn't getting. More of The Judge's magic, I imagined. It made sense that he would instill in each of his victims the need to seek sexual release. What I had done in the bathroom was proof of that. But it hadn't been enough. I needed more...

I needed Ray.

The apartment was dark when we got back, since we had neglected to leave any lights on. Ray leaned toward the light switch as we entered, but impulsively, I pulled him away, back to me. Again, no words were spoken. The language we were now speaking required no vocalization. He turned to me, his arm still around me, and wrapped his other arm around me with both hands resting comfortably on my ass. Gently, he pulled me toward him, and I could feel his manhood pressed against my body with only our clothing in between. I leaned my head back as he dropped his head to meet my lips. The kiss was long and exciting.

When we broke, he looked at me, his eyes twinkling in the light from a nearby streetlight. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked

gently.

No, I wasn't sure, but it felt right. If I was doomed to be a woman for the rest of my life—which seemed likely—I needed to find out now what that really meant. If what Ray had heard was correct, I was safe for now—safe from pregnancy and weeks away from menstruation. This was something of a Mulligan as far as physical consequences were concerned. And as for the psychological consequences... well, it seemed hard to imagine that I would meet anyone in Ovid who meant more to me. "I'm sure," I told him at last. Or at least I was as sure as I could be.

We walked together arm in arm to the bedroom, and there we silently and with trembling hands removed each other's clothing. We were like teenagers, doing it for the very first time, uncertain in our actions but determined to carry on. As I fell onto the bed, I was already so wet I thought for a moment that I had had an accident. Then I swear I got even damper as Ray lay down beside me, his penis long and hard brushing against my thigh.

We didn't take long—at least not the first time. The second time took longer, and the third longer yet. What we lacked in experience in our new sexes, we made up for in enthusiasm. As Ray finally wilted and snuggled up beside me, he was obviously as exhausted as I was.

"Is it always that intense?" he asked me.

"Pretty much," I admitted, coming to grips with the fact that my own orgasms, while not as intense as my male ones, were infinitely more satisfying. I felt almost sorry for Ray, realizing that he would never be able to experience again what I had just enjoyed.

I needn't have worried, though, because he sighed, "That was incredible."

I ran my finger through the thick hair on his chest. "You mean it?"

"Of course. You were wonderful, and I've never felt like that before—I've never felt as if I could... complete a woman like I did just now."

Complete... that was an interesting way of putting it. "Would you go

back to being a woman if you could?" I asked, truly curious at his satisfaction.

"I don't know," he said softly. "Maybe. There are things I miss about being a woman, but what I just experienced makes all of those things seem... paltry." He was silent for a moment—then asked, "How about you? Do you still want to go back to being a man?"

That was a difficult thing to answer. I didn't miss the experience of being a man quite as much as I expected, but I missed the power and authority that seemed to go with my old sex. "I think so," I said at last.

"Really?" He was obviously disappointed.

I kissed him gently. "Don't be so surprised. You were a woman who liked women. Now you're a man who likes women. I have a lot further to go. What we did here was wonderful, but I think given the choice right now, I'd turn back into a man."

"You said you think," he pointed out. "Doesn't that mean you're not sure?"

"Ray," I replied slowly, "I need to try to get my old life back. I need to know I did everything I could to defeat The Judge and make him undo all of this. But if I can't, or if he won't, I'll be happy to stay here—stay with you. Does that make any sense?"

I could see his wan smile in the dark. "So Franklin Malone isn't gone just yet."

"Not yet," I confirmed. But if I couldn't get the information I needed in time, it was just a matter of when he would disappear rather than if.

He hugged me closely. "Okay, Holly. If that's what you want, I'll do my best to help you."

"Thanks, Ray." I hugged him back, burying my face in his shoulder so he couldn't see my tears.

It's funny how quickly you get used to having someone share your bed. When I awoke the next morning, I reached out with my arm,

instantly awake when I realized Ray wasn't in bed with me. I looked around, remembering suddenly all the times I had sex with a woman and left before she awakened, often never to see her again. I had a sudden pang of alarm that that had happened to me. Then I realized how ridiculous that was. This was Ray's apartment. He had to be around somewhere.

As if on cue, the bedroom door opened and Ray stood there, already dressed in a tan sport coat over a pastel yellow dress shirt, open at the collar. "Sorry to alarm you," he said, obviously noticing the look on my face. "I forgot I had a breakfast meeting this morning at seven."

"What time is it?" I asked, barely able to hide my relief.

"About twenty 'til seven," he replied. "You want to meet for lunch over at the *Greenhouse*—about noon?"

"Sure," I replied, sitting up suddenly. I forgot that I hadn't bothered to put on any sleepwear after we had finished last night. Oh well, Holly supposedly slept in the nude. So what if the sheet slid down from my breasts? "Where are you going for breakfast?"

Ray was silent for a moment. His mind didn't seem to be on what I was saying. I guess I could hardly blame him.

"Well?"

"Huh?"

"Where are you having breakfast?"

"Oh! It's sort of a PR event out at Vulman Industries. Apparently the president of the college is going to be there along with about a dozen faculty members. It's sort of a town and gown event, apparently."

"Hmm, Vulman Industries," I commented. "Be sure and take notes. Vulman seems to be part of this puzzle—a very big part of it."

He tapped the side of his head. "I keep all my notes right here."

I laughed and jumped out of bed, not the least bit embarrassed about being completely nude. I threw my arms around him and kissed him hard, letting his beard scratch my face. "Then put that in your

notebook.”

He reluctantly let me go. “It’s already there in yellow highlights.”

Once he left, I began the tedious task of getting ready for work. If I ever got my male body back, there would be several things I would miss about being a woman, but getting ready for work wouldn’t be one of them. To save time, I went on automatic, since my makeup skills still weren’t all that slick. Unfortunately, the downside of that was that I ended up with a little heavier makeup than I would have preferred. My guess was that the original shade Holly believed more makeup made her look more mature and sophisticated. Well she was wrong, but I didn’t have the time or the skills to change it right then.

I went off automatic to dress, though. I originally thought about toning down my mode of dress a little bit to soften Holly’s typical bimbo look. No such luck, though, because all of my work outfits were designed to display my body provocatively. Whether that was part of Aaron March’s dress code or Holly’s personal tastes, I wasn’t sure, but again, there was nothing I could do about it on short notice. I settled on a red knit dress that fit well but was almost uncomfortably short. Also, given the neckline, I would have to be careful when I bent over to get in a file drawer or the men in the office would be able to see more cleavage than I wanted them to see. I found a pair of red shoes to go with the dress, and—wonder of wonders—the heels were only two inches high. A gold chain belt and some simple gold accessories—a bracelet, necklace and earrings—and I was ready to face the world.

Karen was already at her desk by the time I got in. She looked attractive and professional in her gray suit. It was cut tight and short to please our bosses too, but it looked less trappy than my outfit. If I ended up stuck in Ovid as Holly for good, I’d have to get Karen to do some shopping with me so I could emulate her dress. She looked up to say hello and gasped suddenly, “What happened to your face?”

“My face?” I thought I had managed to hide the bruise on my cheek Wally had given me, but apparently even on automatic, I hadn’t been able to disguise it completely.

“Did that bastard boyfriend of yours hit you?” she demanded.

“You mean that bastard ex-boyfriend of mine,” I amended. “I moved out.”

Karen’s face brightened. “Good for you, baby! I didn’t think you’d even get up enough courage to do that.”

“Well, I had help,” I admitted coyly.

Karen’s smile became even wider. “Oh? Come on, girl, tell me about it.”

So I did, leaving out my investigation into Aaron March. I made it sound as if Ray had asked me out, not knowing about my boyfriend and I had accepted. According to my story, we just sort of hit it off and Ray managed to talk me into moving out on Wally. Of course, I left out the sex part, but I think Karen may have figured that out anyway.

It wasn’t the only thing she figured out, though.

“Wait a minute,” she broke in as my story came near to an end.

“Something doesn’t sound right here.”

“What do you mean?” I asked innocently.

Karen stared at me, drilling into my eyes. “You remember who you were, don’t you?”

“What... what are you talking about?” I stammered.

“Hey, there’s just the two of us here,” she pointed out. “I don’t know why you’re trying to make everyone think you don’t remember your past life, but I’ve worked with the shade Holly for several months. There’s no way in the world that Holly would have had the guts to leave Wally. Holly was scared to death of him. And to not only leave, but to move in with another recent transformee... What were you two—lovers in your previous lives?”

“No!” I protested. Oops. I tried unsuccessfully to recover. “I mean I don’t know what you’re talking about. I just...” She wasn’t buying it. Well, admitting to Ray that I remembered my old life had turned out fine—more than fine, in fact. It looked as if I’d have to let someone else

know as well.

“Okay, you got me,” I sighed. Then I went on to explain to her what had originally motivated me to pretend that I had lost my memories.

When I had finished, Karen asked, “Okay, I can understand why you didn’t want Mr. O’Hara to know you remembered. But why keep on pretending now? Surely Ray will protect you from O’Hara. If he could punch Wally out, O’Hara shouldn’t be a problem.”

Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. “I’ve got another reason I don’t want anyone to know,” I told her.

“Oh?”

“Karen, haven’t you ever wanted to get out of Ovid—go back to your real life?”

“Honey, this is my real life now,” she laughed.

“But who were you—before Ovid, I mean?” I pressed.

“That’s considered to be an impolite question,” she informed me, but with a smile. “But I’ll tell you anyway. I used to be work for SBC—you know, they’re AT&T now, but that was what the phone company used to be called here. I was a lineman. I got a little lost looking for a downed line. It’s the usual story, I guess. According to The Judge, I was due to die from a lightning strike while repairing the line, and after one of his little mock trials, I ended up like this.” She motioned proudly with her hands at her attractive body.

“You don’t seem to mind,” I commented dryly.

“Oh, I don’t mind at all—now,” she laughed. “At first though, I was as upset as you are. Unlike you with your asshole boyfriend, I showed up with a husband—a real one, too, although he doesn’t remember who he was. I had a little girl who was a shade, although she’s real now and remembers her past life—her male life—and we’ve since had another little girl together. Imagine what it was like for me. One minute I was a man and the next minute I was a woman with a husband and a daughter—a very horny husband, too, I might add. Unlike you, I couldn’t just kick him out of my place either.”

I shuddered at the thought. If I had shown up in Ovid in this body already married to Wally... well, I didn't want to think about it.

Karen noticed the stricken look on my face and hastened to add, "Don't get the wrong idea. Matt—my husband—was nothing like Wally. In fact, he's a good family man who works for the city and loves his family very much."

"So you didn't have that much trouble adapting?" I asked.

"It took a while, but I got used to it—I actually began to like who I had become. After all, I hadn't left much behind—just a couple of ex-wives and a kid who's growing up calling some other guy 'daddy.' In fact, the way things work here, he probably is biologically the son of my wife's new husband. That's the way it seems to work since the old me doesn't exist anymore."

"Like when I got changed and *Be-All* disappeared," I muttered.

Karen raised an eyebrow. "So that's who you are—you're Franklin Malone!"

My mouth dropped open. "You remember me? I mean the real me?"

She shrugged. "That's the way it works here. Those of us who were changed are aware when something changes in the outside world. I can see, though, why you want to get back to your old life. I remember you and *Be-All* software, though. You were the biggest name in the industry. Now Bill Gates is the hotshot in the software business."

"Gates!" I cried out. "Not that little rat." Hadn't I effectively crushed him? Of course I had, but all that was gone now. Gates' stuff wasn't half as sophisticated as *Be-All*. I wondered for a moment if The Judge had stock in Gates' company.

"Let it go, Holly," Karen advised, emphasizing my new name. "You'll never get your old life back. No one ever has. Surely you know what you're up against. You must know who The Judge is."

I nodded, my blond hair springing as I did. "I know. But I may have found a way. You could help me, and then I could maybe get you your old life back, too." At her look of alarm, I saw that was the wrong

inducement. "Sorry, I forgot you were happy here. But there must be something I could offer you. Money?"

"Holly, it won't work," she insisted. "There's no way for you to get back, but there are plenty of ways for you to get in trouble and be worse off. The Judge can do other things to you, you know—terrible things if the rumors are true."

"But I may have something The Judge wants," I countered.

When I had finished telling her what I had discovered on Mr. March's computer, she frowned. "Holly, you have no idea how dangerous that was. Aaron March is the most unforgiving of all of the g... g... associates of The Judge." I smiled, knowing she had stumbled over the word "gods." As I was learning, most of the residents who retained their memories spoke in coded phrases, such as referring to the gods as "associates," or some equally innocuous term. "If he learned that you had duped him and gotten into his computer, he'd make certain you were punished as only they can punish."

"Maybe," I conceded, "but it gave me an idea. If I can discover how their security was breached, I have something The Judge will want, and I can use that to bargain for my real life."

"A security breach may be accidental, but more than likely, one of The Judge's associates is working for the other side—whatever the other side is," she mused. "If that is the case, you could be in great danger if he or she discovers you're looking for them."

"So? What can this spy do?" I asked. "Do all of these... associates have the power to transform people?"

"I doubt it," she admitted. "But that doesn't mean they don't have other powers. Look at Officer Mercer, for example. And even if they don't all have special powers, I suspect they are just as capable of killing you as any human might be—more so, maybe, since they seem to see themselves as superior to humans."

I had been more afraid of getting caught and changed again than of getting killed. It was a sobering revelation which I hadn't considered.

Although I wasn't that anxious to remain Holly for the rest of my life, I would gladly accept my new existence in preference to being murdered. "Do you really think any of them could kill me?"

"Why not?" Karen countered. "Go check out some of the stories about them in the library. You'll see that they had no problem killing humans if it suited their plans. You might even say they 'kill' those whose memories are lost. Those of us who lose our memories are really no better than flesh and blood shades."

I had to admit to myself that she was right. The crew of our plane had left the courtroom completely unaware of their previous lives. For all practical purposes, those crewmembers had died under The Judge's sentence. I don't know. Maybe deep down, they remembered who they were. Maybe they were now nothing more than unwilling passengers trapped in the mind of new personalities. There was no way of telling. Either possibility was unnerving, though. Maybe I had been one of the lucky ones. I had a new body of a different sex and a new life, but at least I had remained aware of who I really was.

"Will you help me?" I asked Karen. After her admonitions, I didn't really expect her to help me, but to my surprise, she quickly agreed.

"All right. I'll help you." She didn't look too happy about it though.

"Just like that? You'll help me? I thought I'd have to do some serious convincing."

"Look," she explained. "Ovid is my home now. Whatever The Judge and his associates are up to, I think they're out to protect Ovid. Anyone who is opposing them may not have that in mind. There have been a couple of... incidents in Ovid lately that from what I've overheard from Mr. March and his crew could have destroyed Ovid and everyone in it. Just don't get caught, okay? I like my life here now and don't want anything to change it."

"Oh, I'll be very careful," I promised her. After all, it could easily mean my life, too. Only with Karen, The Judge might cut her some slack. As far as I knew, she had been a good girl since she got to Ovid, so she had a track record. Not only did I not have a track record, but I

suspected The Judge would be more than a little pissed if he found out I had only pretended to lose my memories. He would suspect that I had planned something like this from the beginning, and of course, he would be right.

“So what are we going to do?” Karen asked.

“I want to check Mr. Fobes’ hard drive.”

“What!”

“Look,” I explained, “if Mr. March gave him the responsibility of checking on some of the leaks, I want to see what he’s discovered. Since he hasn’t replied to Mr. March’s memos on security—or at least not in writing—I’m assuming he hasn’t found the leak yet. But he probably has some files indicating where he’s already looked. It will give me the jump on finding the leak.”

Karen’s eyes narrowed. “Who do you think you are—the Department of Homeland Security?”

“No,” I admitted, “but you’d be surprised how often something like this happens in the business world. Leaks in private industry can cost millions, and that’s especially true in the software industry. That’s why I ended up in Ovid, actually. We were in a battle to prove that a competitor used our proprietary information to develop a new product. The only problem was that we didn’t count on the competitor turning to violence to stop us. They tried to blow up my plane.”

“Then don’t underestimate those who run Ovid,” she countered. “If they find out what you’re up to, you may just wish you had stayed on that plane!”

But in spite of her protests, she got me into Mr. Fobes’ system. Like many small enterprises, security was lax. It turned out Karen knew his password, although she never would have thought of betraying our boss’s trust like I would have. It took only a few minutes for the data to flow to my flash drive while Karen kept a worried eye on the parking lot.

“Now to see what we have here,” I said gleefully, ready to plug the

flash drive into my USB port.

“Not here!” Karen cautioned. “Mr. Fobes will be here any minute.”

Reluctantly, I put the drive into my purse. I’d just have to wait until I got to Ray’s to check it out.

Mr. Fobes was in good spirits when he finally got into the office. It turned out he was at the same breakfast meeting Ray had attended. “Big things are going to be happening soon in Ovid,” he promised us with a smile.

“Can you give us a hint?” I wheedled innocently. Karen just looked at me as if to say, ‘Don’t ask questions,’ but I wasn’t as cowed as she was. I just hoped she didn’t get so nervous about helping me that she spilled the beans to our boss.

If he noticed Karen’s nervousness, he didn’t let on. Instead, his smile just got broader. “I wish I could tell you Holly, but it’s a real secret. Let’s just say that it’s good news for Ovid.”

I just shrugged, as if whatever he had learned wasn’t really all that important for a sweet little girl like me. Besides, I’d find out everything that happened at the meeting from Ray that evening—unless, of course, the gods had held another meeting after the breakfast meeting in which mere mortals like Ray were not included.

I was pretty sure that the meeting at Vulman had at least hinted at the new motor. From what I had read in Aaron March’s files, it was only a matter of selecting the right timing for the unveiling of the invention. I supposed the gods were waiting until the hinted additional parts of their plan were further along. That was probably wise, since once the announcement was made, world markets would be in chaos and the social structure of several Middle-Eastern countries that had put all of their eggs in the oil production basket would be in upheaval. I had been in business long enough to know that markets hate instability. Ironically enough, the new engine could have a devastating short-term influence on the world economy.

After making a few phone calls behind closed doors, Mr. Fobes

rushed off, saying something about a working lunch. I looked up at the clock. It was only ten-thirty, so I doubted if lunch was all he was hurrying off for. Maybe he had a girlfriend or something. Morally, I supposed that was okay, since I understood he did not have a wife, but if he had worked for me, I would have probably fired him for wasting company time if he pulled the 'working lunch' ploy too often. I had to remind myself, though, that my days of firing people were probably over—unless I could make some headway on the security leak.

I was in good spirits as I left the office that day. Poor Karen looked as if she expected the FBI and the CIA to jump her on the way to her car, so if anyone would have seen us leaving, they would have been struck by the contrast. Fortunately, we had had the office to ourselves all afternoon, so there was no one to notice.

As I had expected, Mr. Fobes never came back from his 'working lunch.' I found out from Karen that Aaron March would usually take his two henchmen with him for a round of golf at least twice a week. Somehow it was hard for me to imagine a senior member of the Greco/Roman gods and his two most well-known underlings stomping around on a golf course in a small town in the middle of America. If the situation weren't so monumental for me and all of the rest of us transformees, the idea would have been comical. I even found myself wondering who they managed to get as a fourth, since I wasn't versed enough in mythology to have any idea who might associate with them. Maybe they had reorganized and there was now a God of golf who doubled as the club pro.

Ray wasn't home yet (it's funny how quickly I was beginning to think of his modest apartment as home), so I fired up his computer, anxiously tapping my foot as I waited for it to come up. The instant it was, I jammed the flash drive into the USB port and began to study the files diligently. Nothing leaped out at me, so I sighed dejectedly and set about reading each individual file. I got so engrossed in my work, I didn't even bother to change out of my skirt and heels—something I couldn't wait to do last week. I had made it through only a couple of

dozen files out of hundreds when Ray got home.

“More files?” he asked, amused as he set his briefcase down on a living room chair.

“Yeah, from Mr. Fobes’ computer,” I replied, “but there doesn’t seem to be anything obvious.”

He looked over my shoulder, resting his right hand on my arm. In spite of myself, I enjoyed the feeling. I vowed to not respond too much to his touch, or we could very easily find ourselves back in the bedroom again. While my body reminded me how pleasant that could be, my mind pointed out that I had a lot of files to go through.

“I wouldn’t expect anything obvious,” he commented, looking at the screen where a letter to Farmers’ and Merchants’ Bank was displayed, thanking the bank for support during last year’s Christmas promotions.

“What wouldn’t be obvious?” I asked, a little annoyed, since I was already having a hard enough time sifting through the documents.

He thought for a moment. “Well, for one, most chambers of commerce send out a lot of letters to individuals and firms interested in moving to their town. But letters from this chamber might be bogus.”

I turned and looked at him. “Wait a minute—if chambers write letters like that all the time, why would any of those letters on this drive be bogus?”

Ray gave me his best professorial smile and explained, “Because no one is supposed to know where Ovid is—or that it even exists. Who would he be writing those letters to?”

Crap! I hadn’t even thought of that. Thank goodness Ray had talked to me before I had gotten too far into the file. I still had a lot of material to cover, but at least I had a better idea now of what I might be looking for. I could kiss him for that...

No, maybe I shouldn’t. Last night had been... interesting. Okay, last night had been downright enjoyable, but that had just been a... a conquest. Yeah, that’s what it had been. I was just like my old life, but

with the sexes reversed. I had taken a break from my primary mission, gotten laid, and now it was back to work. Ray didn't mean anything to me. Well, I mean, he was a friend and all, and I owed him for taking care of me and fending off Wally, but it was just... a friend helping a friend, right?

I continued to pore over the files as Ray fixed dinner. When he called me to dinner, I was reluctant to leave the computer. I'm afraid I wasn't very good dinner company for Ray. All I could talk about was what I had already learned from the files.

"Several of the files are letters sent to Syria. Why Syria?" I wondered. "As I recall, they don't even have much oil. I wouldn't think there was anything there to be of concern to the g... to Mr. Fobes and his friends."

"What are the letters about?" Ray asked as he idly pushed an excellent steak salad around his plate.

I shrugged. "Mostly questions about how 'the project' is going, but there's no indication about what this project is. The replies are equally innocuous, simply stating that everything is on track. That tells me nothing."

"Not necessarily," Ray reminded me. "Do you remember when we were still in the air, you told me test signals from the satellite were being dampened from two areas?"

"Yeah, so?" I asked, not really remembering at all.

"One of those areas was here—Ovid," he told me. "The other came from somewhere near Damascus—in Syria."

"I know where Damascus is," I grumbled, angry at myself for not remembering. "Do you think there's another... place like this—another Ovid in Syria?"

It was Ray's turn to shrug. "Who knows? It's possible, but I can't imagine why. I'm sure there's nothing like Vulman Industries there, so I can't imagine why it would be necessary to have a second town run by... you know."

“Unless...” I began, not quite sure where I was going with that thought. Then it came to me. “Unless there’s another task relating to Ovid—in this other town.”

“What other task could that be?” Ray wanted to know. So did I, but I couldn’t guess.

We had finished our dinner by then, neither of us eating much. I promised Ray I’d clean up later, but he did it while I was still absorbed on the computer. There had to be an answer in the memos on Fobes’ drive.

It was after ten when I found the answer.

“Take a look at this,” I called to Ray. He closed the book he was reading and joined me at the computer.

“What am I looking at?” he asked.

I pulled three documents up at once. “This one,” I began, displaying the first one, “is a message from The Judge forwarded by Mr. Fobes to a Mr. Mahdi in Syria. It says the first phase is on schedule and the second phase is about to get underway. Its dated a couple of years ago. Then this next one is from Syria—no name, but it’s probably this Mahdi since it’s dated the next day. It says the project is well underway and will coincide with this phase two on schedule. It’s the third item that’s really interesting. It’s a letter to a family in Virginia who are interested in moving to Ovid. It’s just like you said—how could anyone be querying the Ovid Chamber of Commerce when no one knows Ovid exists. It’s dated a day after the reply from Syria and states that coming to Ovid after the second phase of ‘our new development plan’ would be promising.”

“So you think Fobes is passing on confidential information to someone outside the loop—this ‘family’ in Virginia?”

“Of course!” I exclaimed, surprised Ray hadn’t picked up on it as quickly as I had. As Taylor, he had always been very quick to put together seemingly-unrelated facts. After all Taylor was the one who had alerted me to the original connection between Syria and

Oklahoma—something I had instantly dismissed as being unimportant. “Don’t you see? This is it! This is my ticket out of here. Fobes is the breach. Aaron March sent the fox to guard the henhouse. The reason Fobes couldn’t make any progress in the security investigation is that he would be implicating himself—maybe others too, like his brother. Once I tell The Judge I know where his security is breached, he’ll have to bargain with me.”

“Or he could just threaten to turn you into a cocker spaniel,” Ray pointed out. “You may have some information he needs—or not—but even if you do, he holds most of the cards in this game.”

I grinned. “You never played poker, did you?” I asked, continuing his analogy to cards.

“Bridge was more my game.”

“Well, bridge is a game of finessing, but this doesn’t call for that,” I told him. “I played a lot of poker in my younger days, and poker is a game of bluffing. All I have to do is convince The Judge he’d be better off dealing with me than fighting me. If I give him the information willingly, I can tell him how to handle it—maybe even staying on for a while to spy on the spy, as it were.”

“This is crazy,” he muttered. “Trying to play The Judge is like trying to juggle an atomic bomb with a hair trigger.”

“I think you overestimate him,” I said earnestly, my old ego resurfacing to help me through Ray’s protests. “If he’s so damned smart, why doesn’t everyone worsh... wor... I mean bow down to him?”

“See?” he crowed. “You can’t even say ‘worship’ when you’re speaking of him. He may or may not be smart, but he’s certainly powerful.”

I was getting very angry now. “What’s your problem, Ray? I thought you were on my side in all of this.”

“I am on your side,” he returned, “but not like this. Look, what’s wrong with staying here in Ovid? Last night was... well, it was wonderful. I never knew how wonderful it could be to be a man. Holly, I don’t want

you to change back. I want you to stay here with me.”

There. He had said it. I should have seen it coming, but I was so intent on finding a way out of Ovid that I hadn’t realized what was happening. Even after we had made love, I hadn’t seen it. After all, when I was a man, sex was just another form of recreation—not a commitment. Ray might be a man now, but I suddenly realized he still thought like a woman, and women were all about commitment.

Strangely, I was drawn to him as well, although I came short of thinking of it as commitment. It was more an alliance of convenience that had developed over the last couple of days into a valid friendship. I thought of Ray as my friend. Even after we had enjoyed sex together, he was still a friend, albeit a very, very good friend. I was still a man deep down inside.

I did actually understand where he was coming from, though. When Ray had been a woman, he had been attracted to other women. For him, this transformation wasn’t such a terrible leap. In some ways, given his new sex and his professional job, he had been ‘promoted’ by The Judge. So why shouldn’t he want to settle down into his new manhood, be a respected college professor, find a sweet young thing to cook his meals and satisfy his sexual needs? In a few years, he could have it all—the nice house, supportive wife, loving children, everything.

As for me, I had been robbed of the empire I had built and been turned into an underachieving, underpaid little near-bimbo whose best prospects lay in finding the right man to take care of her. Sure, sex as a woman was good—damned good—but was it worth giving up everything I had ever had? I didn’t think so.

“I’ve got to change back,” I told him softly. The expression on his face when I told him was almost more than I could take. I could have told him I was dying and only had a month to live and he wouldn’t have looked any worse. Seeing him that way, I felt terrible. I had come to have feelings for him—feelings stronger than I had felt in... well, in a long, long time. Then I had an idea.

“Look, Ray, why don’t we get The Judge to change you back, too?” I suggested. “Then we could leave Ovid together—we could be together.”

He shook his head. “No, it wouldn’t work. Don’t you understand? I love being who I am. I love being male, being a college professor. And...”

Oh shit. Here it comes...

“...and I love you.”

Those words should have had no impact on me. Franklin J Malone wouldn’t have understood them: he might have even laughed at them. But Holly Lamar felt them like a knife plunging into her chest. She hadn’t wanted to hear them. She would have run from the room if she had seen them coming so quickly. She wasn’t really surprised, though. And since she was me...

My eyes were stinging. I could feel unbidden tears forming. I didn’t want him to see me like this. With a sudden cry, I jumped up from my chair, but before I could flee, Ray grabbed me and pulled me into his arms. His face bent down to mine, and as his lips touched mine, my mouth opened reflexively to allow his tongue inside.

I didn’t try to stop him. I couldn’t think of anything to say. No, I hadn’t changed my mind about retrieving my old life, but I wanted this as much as he did. I felt my body tingle, remembering last night together. My body was begging for release, and no matter how strong my resolve was to try to get my old body back, I couldn’t deny my new one this one last moment.

We undressed each other quickly, silently. The last of our clothing hadn’t hit the floor before we were on the bed, caressing each other as our breathing became more ragged. While I had taken his penis inside me before, I had never really handled it until now. It was so big and firm, it excited my body even more than the previous evening. Of course, the night before, I hadn’t really known what to expect. Now I did, and I wanted it... wanted it very badly.

When at last I had guided him inside me, my stricken male mind sent

out one last alarm, reminding me that no matter how good—how right—this felt, I needed to return to my real life as soon as I could. But when the orgasm struck me at last, what was real and what wasn't seemed to take on entirely different meanings.

We were both too conflicted to go for a second round. I think Ray realized I still planned to go through with my attempt to get my old life back. We had both spent ourselves in a last bout of passion, and any further sexual activity would be a reaffirmation of our relationship—a doomed one if I were successful. Still, we fell asleep, naked, in each other's arms.

The next morning, I got up first, slipping out of Ray's embrace. I spent a moment looking down at him as he peacefully slept, thinking of how delectable he looked. My female body was predisposed to want him, and want him I did. But if The Judge agreed to change me back, by the end of the day, Ray would just be another guy—just like me. His male body would hold no attraction for me—none at all.

Be strong, I told myself. Remember, you were never meant to be a girl. Deep down, you're still a man, even if you don't look like one. You have to go through with this. It's who you really are.

I tried to ignore my body as I took a shower. Fortunately, I was one of those girls who didn't have to shave every day, so a quick soap and rinse took care of my needs for the morning. Of course, I couldn't ignore my face as I applied my makeup. It was a pretty face, I had to admit. It took only a minimum of makeup to make it look good. I tried to avoid admiring it too much, though. With any luck, it wouldn't be mine in a few hours.

Dressed in a dark blue suit over a white shell, I thought I looked sufficiently professional for an appearance before The Judge. I wanted him to take my proposal seriously, so I had dressed the part. The skirt, of course, was almost obscenely short, but that couldn't be helped.

"Good luck," Ray called from the bedroom door as I was grabbing a quick glass of orange juice before rushing out. I had been hoping to

avoid him that morning. I had never been good at goodbyes, and this one seemed particularly painful. But he was already dressed, too, in a striped green shirt and a pair of khaki Dockers—his standard attire for teaching a class.

“Thanks, Ray,” I said seriously. “Thanks for everything.” I went over to him and kissed him somewhat chastely. “Thanks for being a friend.”

“I’ll always be your friend,” he vowed, “even if...” His voice trailed off, as if he was unable to say it.

I squeezed his arm and tried to smile. “Yes, Ray, even if.” Then I turned and headed out the door before I could start crying.

I called The Judge’s office from Ray’s apartment and set up a meeting with him at ten that morning. If Mr. Fobes questioned it, I’d just say I had a dentist’s appointment and hope that Karen would back me up on it.

Karen’s car wasn’t in the parking lot when I got to the office. That was strange. She was always there ahead of me. Of course, I had only been working with her a few days, I realized. Maybe she came in later on Tuesday. I didn’t think much about it.

Mr. Fobes was the only other person in the office when I got to my desk. While I had decided he was a somewhat comical character, reminding me of Lorenzo at least in demeanor as he sycophantically followed Aaron March around like an obedient little puppy dog, there was something different about him that morning. As I stuffed my purse into a bottom drawer, I realized he was watching me from the doorway to his office. He was quiet, and out of the corner of my eye, he seemed almost to be studying me.

The hairs on the back of my neck were sticking out a little, and I felt a small but noticeable shiver up and down my spine. It was a feeling I hadn’t felt very often in my life. It was fear.

“Ms. Lamar.” He said it softly, thoughtfully, and the feeling of fear seemed to get a little worse. What was I afraid of? I had covered my tracks well (I thought): there was no reason for concern, was there?

But the fear was still there.

“Where’s Karen this morning?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

“She had to leave.”

I waited for him to elaborate, but when he said nothing else, I pressed, “Did she have a problem?”

Mr. Fobes was standing in front of my desk now. He wasn’t a particularly large man, but he was somehow imposing. “It wasn’t exactly a problem. She has a terrible fear of snakes, did you know that?”

“I don’t know very many people who do like them,” I replied nervously, trying to avoid his eyes by sifting through the paperwork on my desk.

“That’s true, but she fears them—fears them very much it seems.”

He was toying with me, and I felt myself perspiring now. He knew! I didn’t know how, but somehow, he knew I had learned of his duplicity.

“Do you know what my name means—my real name I mean?”

“I... I can’t say it,” I reminded him, looking down. “It’s not permitted.”

“Oh, but I hereby give you permission to say it in front of me right now,” he said expansively. Then he looked down at me and scowled.

“Tell me what my name means.”

I sighed. “You are Phobos, the God of... the God of Fear.”

He smiled. It wasn’t a pleasant smile. “That’s right. My name means fear in ancient Greek. From that root comes your term ‘phobia.’ What are you afraid of, Ms. Lamar?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Oh surely you must have some idea,” he pressed. “Like Karen, snakes perhaps?”

I’m not particularly afraid of snakes and never have been, but the sudden, silent presence of a large gray snake with piercing red eyes slithering across my desk was enough to make me jump back, my breasts bouncing comically as I did.

“Or perhaps it’s spiders you don’t like...”

I didn’t know tarantulas grew as large as the furry monster that scuttled over the edge of my desk. Even as the snake disappeared from view, slithering over the edge of the desk, the spider was joined by two more, each as large as the first.

“I had a pet spider as a boy,” I told him, trying to remain calm and bracing for what would come next. Even then, I wasn’t really prepared as my chair seemed to zoom upward, shooting past a roof which seemed to peel away to let me climb until I must have been several miles above the town of Ovid.

“Heights are another fear of many people...” His voice seemed to be coming from everywhere, carried by the stiff, cold breeze that caused my hyper-extended chair to sway back and forth in the breeze.

“What do you want?” I cried out, clutching the sides of my chair.

“Answers,” was his reply.

Once again, I was at my desk. I looked up and saw the ceiling was still in place. It had been an illusion—all of it—but it seemed so real...

“You’ve been getting files from my computer.” It was a statement: not a question. “I want whatever file copies you have and I want them now.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you do,” he insisted, taking a step toward me, “and I think I do know what you’re really frightened of.”

“Hello, Holly.”

The voice came from behind me, and it sent a chill up my spine. I turned and looked up into the intense stare from Bill O’Hara. As he looked down at me, Mr. Fobes said pleasantly, “I couldn’t help but notice at the *Greenhouse* the other day that you didn’t care much for Mr. O’Hara’s attentions.”

Unconsciously, I wheeled my chair back until it bumped into my desk, trying to get as far as I could from my nemesis.

“Yes, I figured out your main reason for trying to make us think you no longer had your memories,” Mr. Fobes went on. “When I found out that Mr. O’Hara had been one of your employees, the reason became obvious.”

O’Hara just grinned.

“It’s a shame we never met in the outside world,” Mr. Fobes said. “It seems you were very good at instilling fear in others just as I am. Of course, you were limited in your abilities, being human and all. I don’t have that limitation.”

O’Hara reached down and literally ripped the front of my blouse away, exposing my bra. I couldn’t help it: I screamed. I knew I was no match for my former employee, and there was no doubt from his vile expression what he intended to do to me.

This was a hundred times worse than Wally’s intimidation. Wally had no idea that I really disliked him, and he had just been trying to get what he had come to think of as rightfully his. Bill O’Hara knew who I was and he knew what he was doing.

“Please... no!” I begged.

“That’s enough, Fobes!” a voice called from the back door.

Fobes and I looked up at the same time into the mirrored sunglasses of Officer Mercer. Fobes muttered an expletive in a language I didn’t recognize and wheeled for the front door. He needn’t have bothered. In what seemed like no time at all, Officer Mercer had grabbed him and thrown him to the floor with a heavy thud.

O’Hara didn’t flee though. He just stood there, holding onto the remnants of my blouse. And then, suddenly as Fobes kissed the floor, O’Hara was gone. I looked down at myself and saw that my blouse was intact. O’Hara had just been another of Fobes’ illusions. I stood up almost reflexively and laughed, but the laugh quickly became a choked cry.

“It’s okay, Holly,” a familiar voice said, and comforting arm was suddenly around my shoulders.

“Ray!” I cried happily. I turned my head and looked up, relieved to see him looking down at me. “Where did you come from?”

He got a little red in the face. “I decided to follow you,” he admitted. “I thought maybe I’d go see The Judge with you—sort of as moral support.”

There was something he wasn’t telling me, though, and I was pretty sure what it was. “You also thought that maybe you’d take one more shot at convincing me to not ask The Judge to change me back, didn’t you?”

He nodded. “Yes, but it’s still your decision, Holly.”

Yes, it was, and as Ray drove me over to City Hall, I had only a few blocks to think about it. I twisted the little flash drive around in my fingers, noticing as I did the pink polish on my fingernails. It was as if staring at my hand, I could see clearly the choices before me. In that tiny drive was information I hoped was important enough to get me placed back in my old life. With any luck, I’d be my old self within the hour.

But I could also see who and what I had become as I looked at the slender feminine fingers that held the drive—nails pink-tipped and shaped so perfectly. I looked further, up my slim wrist, surrounded by a delicate gold bracelet. Then I looked on at my nearly-hairless arm with its delicate dusting of fine hairs, so pale against my skin that they scarcely showed.

I looked down at my breasts. My outfit displayed them well, pushing them slightly together and creating an enticing little canyon between their milky domes. For the last few days, men had blatantly stared at them—initially to my chagrin, but lately to my satisfaction.

There were pluses and minuses to being a girl, I realized. On the minus side, I would have periods to look forward to—hardly an enticement. Of course, not having a period could be even worse, since it would mean I was pregnant. I didn’t exactly consider myself to be mommy material. Then there was the time spent getting ready—all of the brushing and trimming and painting and coordinating and shaving

and God only knew whatever else. Then once I was dressed and ready to face the world, there were the hours I had already spent at work—not being taken seriously and nearly ignored by Aaron March and his cronies. And when some of the men didn't ignore me—such as O'Hara—I found myself wishing they would. That all added up to a lot of minuses.

But there had been a plus side, too, I admitted to myself. If The Judge refused to change me back, I could live with my new sex. As for the periods, well, women seemed to hold up under them reasonably well. I didn't have to get pregnant either. That was a choice for women now—not an imperative. As for the preparation time, at least there was a payoff—the looks I got were ego-enhancing to say the least. As for not being taken seriously or even ignored, maybe that was the way Holly had positioned herself through her wardrobe, her makeup, and her choice of jobs and men.

The biggest plus, though, had to be Ray. He had saved me twice already—three times if I included his helping me escape the rut The Judge had put me in to become my own man—or woman, rather. And I had to admit, sex as a woman was pretty damn good. I hadn't thought it would be. The thought of a man ramming himself inside my body should have been enough to run chills of horror up my spine, but it had turned out to be immensely satisfying.

As we pulled up in front of City Hall, I realized the real difference was that as a man, I had power and wealth. The only problem was that I had to admit to myself that I had used both poorly. I had used power to intimidate others, just as O'Hara and Mr. Fobes had each tried to do to me. It hadn't been a very pleasant experience, and one that had caused me not to respect either man but rather to hate them.

As for wealth, what had it really gotten me? If I were entirely honest with myself, I had to admit that I had become bored by my wealth and wary that others around me befriended me on because of what my wealth might do for them. To be honest, I had no idea how much I had been worth. Sure, I always ranked high in *Forbes Magazine's* annual poll, but I don't think anyone except my accountants knew how much I

was really worth. However much it was, had it bought me any measure of happiness? Not really, I supposed.

Ray took my hand as we walked together to The Judge's chambers. We were met by a woman who I took to be The Judge's secretary, since her desk was in front of his office. She rose when we entered, and I realized suddenly that I had seen her before, sitting in the courtroom the day I had been transformed. "Hello, Ms. Lamar," she said in a friendly tone. I wondered how she knew my name, but of course, she had been there when I was given it. "I'm Cindy Patton. The Judge will see you now."

We both started to go in, but the blonde secretary's smile disappeared. "I'm afraid The Judge only wants to see you, Ms. Lamar. Mr. Garcia will have to wait out here."

"But..." Ray began, but I quieted him with a pat on his arm. "I'll be all right," I assured him.

He looked forlorn. "But I... I may never see you again."

I hadn't thought of that. If I got what I was after, it would be Franklin Malone who walked back out of The Judge's chambers. "I know," I replied softly. "But I have to do this, Ray."

He nodded sadly and turned away as I walked through the chamber door to an unknown future.

"Ms. Lamar." The Judge rose in courtly fashion as I entered, causing me to be aware once more of just how feminine I must appear. I took his proffered hand and winced in preparation for the hard handshake men inadvertently gave women. My hand was so small that in my limited experience as a woman, I had had it crushed several times already by an unwitting man. The Judge's handshake was gentle, though—not weak: just gentle.

When I had been seated in a large leather chair in front of his desk, he sat back and folded his hands. "Now, what exactly can I do for you today, Ms. Lamar?"

"I... I have some information you may need," I began nervously as I

fiddled with the straps of my purse.

“So I understand.” When he saw the surprise on my face, he smiled and explained, “Officer Mercer has already told me what happened at your office this morning.”

“Well,” I continued, realizing that my information had been compromised. The Judge already knew that Mr. Fobes had been up to something, so my bargaining power was severely cut. “I can provide you with evidence,” I offered. “I have his computer files...”

“So do I,” The Judge pointed out. He was obviously amused and toying with me.

“Look,” I sighed, “I did your legwork. I found someone in your organization who was spying for the enemy.” It struck me that I really had no idea who the enemy was, but it was obvious that there was an enemy. “Don’t I deserve some consideration?”

The Judge leaned forward. “Perhaps you do. You did discover a security breach that had eluded Mr. March for some time. I rather think he was too close to the problem to see who the guilty party was. Exactly what would you like, Ms. Lamar?”

This was it. This was the moment—the payoff. All I had to do was ask him to change me back. The worst that could happen was that he would say no. “Could you change me back to my old self?” I asked more timidly than I had intended.

“I could,” he admitted, “but is that what you really want?”

“Why wouldn’t I want it?” I asked. “As a man, I had everything—money, power...”

“Money and power. Good. But is that everything?”

“Well, I guess not,” I had to agree. “But it’s a lot.”

“What about Ray?” he asked.

“I’m sorry... What?” He knew about Ray? Well, of course. He had to know. After all, he must have known Ray was waiting for me outside. For that matter, he was a god—the principal God in the Graeco/Roman

pantheon. Perhaps he could see how our relationship had developed through some mystical power.

“Do you want me to change Ray back to Taylor?” he asked.

I looked down. “He doesn’t want to change back. He’s happy being a man.”

“Not surprising,” The Judge returned. “After all, who wouldn’t prefer to be a man? If you’ve read our myths, you know that being turned into a woman was considered a punishment.”

“Is that why you did this to me?” I asked. “As a punishment?”

“In a manner of speaking,” he replied. “We need humans to fill the roles of citizens in Ovid for the day when... well, let’s just say there will be a day when we need our population to be completely human. It pleases me when I can find a role for our new residents that teaches them something about being better people. Often, the change of sex is required to get them to shed their old lives more quickly.”

“And I needed to be taught something,” I finished for him.

He nodded, smiling. “Yes. You needed to be taught that money and power weren’t everything.”

“Have I learned that?”

“I’m not sure,” he replied. “I think the old you would have insisted I turn Ray back into Taylor just because it suited you. You might even rationalize that given time, he would be happier that way. The new you admitted that Ray was perfectly happy to remain as he is.”

“But you can change me back?”

“I’ve already answered that question. Of course I can change you back. Some changes would have to be made of course, so you could survive the plane crash that was about to take your life, but it could be done.”

There was silence between us. At last, I asked, “So what happens next?”

“You have to tell me what you want.”

“Huh?”

“You asked if I could change you back. The real question is will I change you back,” he clarified. “You seem to be reluctant to ask it that way.”

That’s true, I realized. Why hadn’t I thought of that? All I had to do was ask him—really ask him—to change me back. But I hadn’t said it yet. It was as if something was keeping me from saying it.

This time, it was The Judge’s turn to break the silence. “Do you love him?”

“Huh?” I had been saying that a lot lately.

“Ray—do you love him?”

Suddenly, it was my turn to answer a question. I wanted to say no, but somehow, I couldn’t bring myself to say it. There was only one other answer, wasn’t there?

“Yes.”

I didn’t see the tears coming, but come they did as I burst forth with a stream of water, heaving gently as I realized that I really did love Ray. And what I was doing to him right now must be killing him. How did the old saying go? ‘If you love someone, set her free.’ Ray had done that for me. How did the rest of it go? ‘If she comes back, she’s yours. If she doesn’t, she never was.’

Which was I?

Ray was waiting for me when the door to The Judge’s chambers opened. He looked up, resigned to seeing a man standing there—a man he had once reluctantly worked for. I could see the sorrow in his eyes, the resignation that caused his whole body to slump. Then, his eyes widened, as if trying to comprehend what he was seeing. His shoulders straightened, just a little at first.

“My God!” he exclaimed, his eyes wide now with excitement muted by just a small helping of confusion, but he was on his feet now, rushing

straight for me. “Holly?”

“Sort of,” I replied coyly, taking his trembling hands in my smaller ones. “I guess you could say I’m an older but wiser Holly now.”

“I don’t understand...”

“Let’s get a cup of coffee and I’ll explain.”

I led him down the hall to the small canteen nestled in a back corner of City Hall. It consisted of just four tables—all deserted now—and a row of vending machines. Once we had gotten our coffee and sat down, Ray remarked, “Something about you is different, but I can’t quite figure out what.”

I smiled indulgently. “Spoken like a true man. Are you going to be one of those guys who never notices when a girl changes her hairstyle or makeup?”

“Your hair is different,” he said slowly. “It’s a little shorter... and a little darker, but still blond. And your makeup is... just a little more subtle. And the way you’re dressed...”

“What’s wrong with the way I’m dressed?” I asked in mock anger, motioning to the pink cotton sweater and tight jeans I now wore. “I’m dressed pretty well for a college student, don’t you think?”

“You’re a college student?” His mouth was open now.

“Okay,” I laughed, “I’ll tell you the whole story. The Judge offered me a deal. In return for my services, he ‘adjusted’ Holly’s life just a little. Instead of being a little bimchette, Holly was an A student who earned a scholarship to attend Capta. Don’t look so worried, Ray. I’m not an Economics major, so I’m not one of your students. Also, I’m just a little older now—a junior, in fact—and my parents never moved away. I live with them now while I’m going to school. So I guess I got my Coach life upgraded to First Class.”

“But you’re still a girl.”

“I’m so glad you noticed.”

“Then... The Judge wouldn’t change you back?”

I smiled at Ray, squeezing his hand across the table. “He said he would, but somehow, this seemed a little more... right.”

Understanding flashed across his face. “You decided to remain a girl?”

I nodded.

“My girl?”

I nodded again.

“So,” he asked tentatively, “where do we go from here?”

I didn’t answer him, but it didn’t take him long to figure it out for himself.

When I opened my eyes once more, I noticed none of the gods were looking at me. All were looking at Aaron March, who was trying very hard to be inconspicuous—and failing.

“I’ve told you for centuries your two toadies couldn’t be trusted,” Eric Vulman broke the silence. There were murmurs of agreement from the other gods.

Aaron March made a sudden attempt at defending his cohorts by posing indignantly and pointing out, “Up until now, neither Phobos nor Deimos has given me any reason not to trust them. Their work has been exemplary.”

Eric Vulman just snorted at that. I smiled to myself. I had read enough mythology to know that there was little love lost between the two of them. It was interesting, though, that apparently Deimos was involved in the security breach as well. Not even Holly had known that for sure. It meant that with two of them feeding information to the other side, it was likely much if not all of the gods’ plan had been compromised. No wonder Eric Vulman had taken this moment to twist a barb into his old adversary. The God of War had probably never been so vulnerable before.

“I might question,” Eric Vulman continued to attack, “our brother’s own motives in this matter. After all, he does represent the side of war in

our lore...”

Aaron March turned as red as the planet named for him. “I would remind my half-brother that I have supported my father in this entire plan. No one wishes to see total annihilation of all intelligent life on this planet. I would remind him that such a devastating war would mean our own end as well.”

It was Vulman’s turn to get red now. March had delivered to him the ultimate insult, by calling into question his parentage. Again, according to some of the myths, Vulcan was a love child of Juno’s to get even with Jupiter for his dalliances. It was said that this was the reason Vulcan lacked the striking good looks of Jupiter’s other offspring. From Vulcan’s reaction, it was possible that there was some truth to the matter.

“Gentlemen!” The Judge broke in with a voice that demanded as much attention among the gods as the one he used in the courtroom. “We have no time for such quarrels. Our two offenders have already been tried and are currently in the care of Mr. Haynes.”

I shuddered involuntarily. Mr. Haynes was Hades, God of the Underworld—or in this case, keeper of the prison which held the enemies of Ovid in some sort of other-worldly suspension. I had never liked either of the guilty beings, but I felt a certain sympathy for them nonetheless.

“As for the plan, it continues on schedule, both here and in the Middle East. We will announce our new engine within the next two years as scheduled. As for the second and third phases, we will be ready to introduce them at the right time now that the security breach has been healed.

“The purpose of this meeting was not for recriminations. It was to assure all interested parties that appropriate action had been taken and that no further investigation of this matter is required at this time.

“Is that understood?”

There was no rumble of thunder with his final question, but there might

as well have been. Each of the gods nodded slowly, stood, bowed to The Judge and silently made their exits—even Vulman and March followed protocol without question.

That left Susan and I alone with The Judge. It was by design, I knew, and The Judge was just waiting for the question on both Susan's and my mind. Susan voiced it for us. "Can you tell us exactly why we are 'interested parties'?"

"I don't want to tell you everything just yet," he began, disappointing both Susan and me, "but it's obvious that you need to know more than you have either been told or figured out on your own. You have both deduced that the introduction of our new motor will revolutionize the world economy as we now know it?"

I nodded. "We had figured that much. But the war..."

"The war would happen if nothing was done to eliminate the growing need for oil," The Judge explained. "The war will also occur if our motor is introduced—in fact, it will happen sooner as Moslem nations which have not integrated themselves into the global economy fall and are replaced by radical regimes—just as Mr. Garcia explained to Holly."

"I think we pretty much figured that out, too," Susan offered.

The Judge nodded. "You are both highly intelligent individuals. I would have expected nothing less of you. What you may not know is that your families and families like yours in another location will play an essential part in stopping that war before it can begin."

"I don't understand," I said.

"I'd rather you didn't know all of the plan just yet," The Judge told us. "It will become clear to you soon. Until then, I ask that you trust us and be confident that we know what must be done. Be assured that your safety and the safety of your families is of utmost importance to all of us—and to the world."

"Now, if you'll excuse me..."

He left the room before we could think of anything else to say. He had

left us in suspense once more, telling us little more than he had already told us. In fact, he had only confirmed what we had already believed.

“Have you figured it out yet?” Susan asked me.

“I’m not sure,” I told her. “I think maybe I have, but I don’t want to say until I know for sure.”

“Not even to me?” Susan looked hurt that I wouldn’t confide in her. After all, she was my best friend and had been since she had first come to Ovid.

Reluctantly, I shook my head. “I’m sorry, Susan. I’m still not sure of everything yet. But I will be soon. And when I do, you’ll be the first to know.”

Ovid XXI: The Answers

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I awoke from an unplanned nap with a start. In spite of the pleasant sounds of an early summer day—the barking of a dog several yards away, the sounds of the sprinkler watering the yard next door, and the muffled sound of a baseball game on TV coming from inside the house where Jerry was watching a KC Royals game, and the soft buzz of a pesky fly—I had awakened in an agitated state. I had been dreaming as I lay on the comfortable chaise lounge on our shaded patio. It was a very, very bad dream, for I had been dreaming I was a man.

Odd that I should think of being a man as bad, I smiled to myself. But there it was. How differently I now thought, I mused, considering that I had been born male and had always been very happy of it—until The Judge turned me into a woman.

I had been a woman—a wife and a mother, no less—for several years now, ever since The Judge had turned me into Cindy Patton, his assistant. I had not only become accustomed to being a woman, but actually to embrace it as well. I had become used to dressing in skirts and heels and enjoying the looks men gave me. Sure, I could stand to lose a pound or two, but I was blonde and well endowed, and I could have probably passed for no more than thirty, although I was, in fact... well, that's nobody's business, really.

The experience of being forced into a new life in Ovid was a familiar one to almost all of us who lived there—or at least those of us who had been transformed by The Judge and were fortunate enough to retain our original memories. We all went through the same trial by fire, learning to deal with who we had become—often having to accept a new age, race, sex, or some combination of all of them. And we all went through the same stages of disbelief, denial, anger, and acceptance until we at last became happy with who we had become.

So you see, awakening from a dream in which I had regained (or perhaps never lost) my original sex was now unsettling and distasteful. I was a woman—now and forever—and I wouldn't have given up my new life and my wonderful new family for anything.

There was however, one thing which gnawed at me—at many of us in Ovid for that matter. The burning question which many of us yearned to have answered was short and simple: why were we here? No, that wasn't a metaphysical question: we all wanted to know why this change had been forced upon us.

The gods of ancient Greece and Rome had established Ovid for a purpose: that much seemed clear. However, no one seemed to know what that purpose was—except the gods, of course. There was no doubt we were all a part of that purpose, but what was it? Susan Jager and I undoubtedly knew more of the gods' purpose than anyone else in town, but when you got right down to it, even we didn't know very much.

Again, I asked myself, why are we here?

Little did I realize on that warm, early summer day that my burning question was about to be answered.

I had closed my eyes again—not to sleep, but to listen to the summery sounds, aware that soon Ashley would awaken from her nap, the twins would be home after visiting their friends, Jerry would awaken from his well-deserved nap in front of the television, and the house would erupt into the loving chaos that was a family night at the Patton house. I smiled at the thought, disturbing dreams of being saddled once more with a penis scattering from my mind.

“Now all you need is a cold lemonade,” a woman's voice floated on the warm air.

I turned my head to see Diana, my goddess friend, a frosty glass filled with pink lemonade in her hand. Gratefully, I accepted the glass and sipped. It was the best lemonade I had ever tasted. I was tempted to ask her for the recipe, but something told me that some if not all of the ingredients would be a little hard to come by.

“Fantastic!” I breathed.

Diana sat next to me in a patio chair which had been on the other side of the deck less than a second before. She was smiling as she looked at me, but her eyes spoke of concern.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You’re needed in The Judge’s chambers,” she informed me gently. “Right away,” she added.

“On a Sunday?” I sat up. “Is there something wrong?” The Judge was good about not interrupting my weekends unless there was an emergency. Given that some of the latest emergencies had meant peril for my family, I was instantly alert, the taste of the lemonade suddenly sour in my mouth.

Diana laid a gentle hand on my bare shoulder. “Don’t worry. It’s nothing like that.” I knew she couldn’t read minds. None of the gods could exactly do that, but she had known me long enough to be able to read my expressions and body language. She paused for a moment. Then she asked, “You know what’s happening tomorrow, don’t you?”

I nodded. Yes, I knew tomorrow was to be a big day in Ovid. Well, not exactly in Ovid, but what was to happen would have a significant effect on our town. Tomorrow in Tulsa, where most outsiders believed Vulman Industries was headquartered, our town’s biggest employer would announce the *Freedom Engine*. The *Freedom Engine* was the accomplishment of Vulman’s engineers, created as only it could have been with the seemingly-endless resources of the gods. It was so called because it ran for hundreds of thousands of miles, fueled by light itself, and the only petroleum products it required were small amounts of oil whose job it was to lubricate the mechanical workings.

The Engine was as revolutionary as the Wright Brothers’ airplane, or the atomic bomb. Overnight, the demand for oil would drop drastically, and the price of petroleum products with it. Oil stocks would suffer catastrophic collapse, and leaders in the Middle East and other oil-producing areas who had had their own way for decades would be

ruined.

Just the announcement of the Engine would cause all of that. Then, once the world learned that Vulman planned to license the new device for a fraction of its true value... well, the results according to the Oracle would be immense. Unfortunately, not all of those immense results would be positive.

I knew of course, that the gods had a plan for the chaos that would ensue. Without a plan, the entire Moslem world was in danger of slipping into revolution and catastrophic war. But although I knew more about the actions of the gods than any other human in Ovid, I was still in the dark as to what they would do.

"We need to make certain that things are... on track," Diana told me as I started for the house to get changed.

"On track?" I asked as she followed me into the house. I looked over at my husband who was asleep on the couch. I knew my younger daughter would still be asleep, too. Diana often spelled them to sleep when The Judge needed to see me on short notice. I didn't worry about them, though. Somewhere, a godly guard—probably Officer Mercer—would be watching over them to ensure that no harm befell them.

"Yes, on track," Diana repeated, but she didn't elaborate. As long as I had been in Ovid, she and I had been good friends, but the secrets of the gods were just that—secrets. There was no way she would tell me what was so important to their project.

When we arrived in The Judge's chambers, I was not surprised to see several of the more senior gods there as well: the Marches—actually, Mars and Venus—were seated together on the leather couch. Betty Vest stood beside them, looking every inch the college president, but of course, I knew her to be Vesta. In one corner, Eric Vulman sat in a large leather chair, the only physical attribute which might have identified him as Vulcan being the way he held one leg slightly stiffly. Ms. Miner, the Superintendent of Public Schools sat on the arm of his chair, looking as wise as one would expect of the goddess Minerva.

To my surprise, Susan Jager was also in the room, seated in one of the other leather chairs. My best friend and colleague smiled warmly at me, and I smiled back. She looked very content and very happy, for she had just learned the previous week that she was pregnant again, this time with her second child. I was glad to see that Joshua would have a sibling to play with.

And finally, my eyes turned to The Judge. He looked confident and not at all worried as he reclined in his large leather swivel chair situated behind his desk. He wore an expensive dark suit, white shirt, and conservative red tie, which was his usual attire. Silently, he motioned me to the chair just in front of his desk. When I was seated, he said, "Thank you, Cindy, for coming in on such short notice."

"No problem, Your Honor." And it wasn't. I had been asked on any number of occasions to come in at odd hours. I suspected the gods never slept, and no one seemed to know where they lived and played in their off hours, so I was used to the situation.

"Now that we're all here," The Judge continued, "we can begin our final check before the Engine is introduced tomorrow. Cindy, I would like for you to review the case of Joan Sheppard."

"Joan Sheppard?" I echoed. "But she's been here since last fall." Almost invariably, I was asked to review the case of a newcomer to Ovid, just to make certain they were fitting in well. Joan's case had never been reviewed though, and I would be the one to know, since I was the sole repository of their stories. Joan Sheppard had been around long enough that she had blended in well, often coming to my house when Myra Smithwick was babysitting for me.

"When you've finished with your review, I believe you'll understand why this is so important," The Judge told me. He looked over at Susan and back to me. "For the past few years, you two have performed invaluable services for our community. I realize you must have been curious about our motives, and the time had now come for you to learn of our plans. As you review Ms. Sheppard's case, the truth of Ovid will unfold for you—as I know you have been curious about for several years. Then, when we are done, I'll fill in any of the blanks

which still exist. Is that satisfactory?”

We both nodded. I was excited, and I could see from Susan’s expression that she was, too. We had speculated from the time we had become friends as to what the true purpose of Ovid was. We knew the Engine was a big part of it, and we knew that a devastating war could be in our future if the gods failed, but everything we had already learned had told us that whether or not the Engine was introduced, the war would still happen, unless...

Unless what?

We hadn’t been able to figure that part out, but apparently the gods had.

In recent months, we had found our own families under siege, but we had reasoned that that was because of our association with The Judge and the other gods. However, recently, we had come to realize that the reason for enemies of the gods targeting us might be more specific.

Were we really about to learn the answers?

“Then let’s begin,” The Judge ordered.

That was all it took to start me into my trance. Slowly, the room began to fade, and I began to lose all sensation. Instead, I could feel myself in a dreamless sleep, in darkness, yet moving as if...

I was awakened at the sound of a ‘thump’ as I experienced a teeth-jarring shudder that nearly threw me out of my seat. It happened so suddenly that I took a few moments to remember exactly where I was. The sensation of movement and the occasional light whizzing by outside the tinted window which amplified the darkness of the night reminded me that we were on my bus, cruising through the middle of an Oklahoma night toward Bartlesville, our next destination.

“What was that?” a groggy voice called out from the row of seats across from the row where I had been trying to stretch out and catch at least a couple of hours of much-needed sleep.

“Pothole,” a voice called back from the front of the bus. As if to emphasize his remark, the bus shuddered again, only this time not as violently. “The road’s full of them. Must be the spring thaws. All that ice on the road in these parts last winter chewed up the asphalt something fierce. I guess they didn’t have the money to fix ’em this summer.”

“Then slow down a little,” Aden Cross called out in his clipped British accent from the row just behind me. “We need to get some rest.”

He was right about that, I thought. If I had realized when we were setting up our tour just how arduous this portion of our schedule would be, I would never have agreed to it. We were required to pack up late at night in Broken Bow, Oklahoma, and travel all the way to Bartlesville overnight to set up for a big Friday revival meeting there. It was bad planning, I’ll admit, but the money we were being offered by a large church in Bartlesville was just too much to pass up. We were offered a guarantee of eighty-five percent of the take, plus lodging for our entire staff. Deals that good didn’t come in every day.

Besides, our TV show—*God Sees You*—was broadcast locally in Bartlesville, so the audience would be a lot more responsive than most of the smaller towns on our revival tour. That built-in audience, plus the expected turnout from the sponsoring congregation, spelled a big weekend. We were going to be doing meetings both Friday and Saturday, plus I would be taping my TV show for the following week from the sponsoring church on Sunday afternoon.

Most of my staff were excited about the prospects—even if it meant travelling the back roads of Oklahoma on a supposed shortcut north in the middle of the night. The staff had loudly thanked God for the opportunity when it was announced. I, however, had remained silent.

After all, of all of my staff I alone seemed to know something they did not: There was no God.

Don’t be so shocked. Any number of evangelists are hypocrites to one extent or another. Look at all the ones who rise to power in the big mega-churches, preaching damnation for infidelity, homosexuality,

drug use, and every imaginable 'sin' short of bad breath, only to fall from grace, weeping from the pulpit about how sorry they were when caught cheating on their wives with a gay lover while taking drugs. At least I didn't do any of those things. I lived a pretty puritanical life when you got right down to it—no drugs, no gay lovers, no expropriation of funds, although I do admit to living fairly well.

But I must admit, I was as hypocritical of any of my wayward counterparts in that one respect: while they mostly believed in God in their own warped ways, I had lost my faith the night my wife and unborn son perished.

Oh, it wasn't just that incident. Rather, the deaths of my wife and unborn child were merely the straws that broke the proverbial camel's back. Before that, I had watched helplessly as many of the faithful who followed me died slowly and painfully of a myriad of maladies—including my own parents. By the time I was left alone in the world, my parents, brother, and wife and soon-to-be-born child had all been taken from me. Whose faith wouldn't be shattered after that?

I nearly left the ministry. Morally, I should have, but what was I to do? It was all I had ever known. I had been the son of a Lutheran minister, stern and dictatorial in managing my mother, my brother and me. I had grown up seeking my father's approval as had been drilled into me from the moment I could walk and talk. There was no doubt that I, Hans Groenwald III would follow my two namesakes into the pulpit.

That's right—my grandfather was a Lutheran minister as well. He emigrated from Germany after the Second World War. From him, my father inherited an authoritarian style which fortunately was not passed down to me. No, I vowed I would treat my son with respect and not drive him away as my father had driven my younger brother Henry away. Henry joined the Army as soon as he could and died in Baghdad early in the occupation.

My thoughts of my departed family were interrupted by yet another jolt as the bus shuddered and then stopped. The engine was still running, but we weren't moving.

“Edgar, what’s wrong now?”

“I don’t know,” Edgar, our driver, called back. “That last hole was pretty good-sized. I think we may have broken an axle.”

That brought groans from nearly all twelve of us on the bus—including me. A broken axle out in the middle of nowhere wasn’t good. We’d be late into Bartlesville for sure, perhaps without enough time to set up properly.

“I thought you knew this shortcut,” Aden grumbled to our driver.

“I thought I did,” Edgar replied, obviously not too happy with himself. “I think they changed the road, though. This one doesn’t look like it’s been maintained for a long time. It doesn’t look like we’ll be going anywhere for a while.” As if to emphasize the point, he shut down the engine.

“Better open a door,” Marlin, our organist, called out from a few seats back. “When you shut down the engine, the air conditioning stopped.”

“No!” Aden called out. “We won’t get any circulation. It’s still hot outside and cool in here.”

No one realized it at the time, but Aden’s perfectly sensible statement would nearly cost all of us our lives.

What we found out later was that the damage hadn’t been caused by spring thawing. Rather, unusually heavy summer rains had played havoc with the road our driver had chosen. Had the road been an important one, emergency repairs might have been arranged, but the road wasn’t used much anymore. Before dozing off, I hadn’t noted more than a handful of cars going the other way. Unbeknownst to our driver, the road had been downgraded to county maintenance, and since it was used only by a few local farmers, it had a very low priority. That was why there were potholes the size of tank traps along its length.

Worse yet, there were several unmarked—or under-marked—hazards along the road, including a railroad crossing exactly where the bus had stopped. While most railroad crossings had gates and/or flashing

lights, the one we had stopped on had neither, since the track was only a spur with two trains a day. Of course, I learned all of this much later.

“Do you hear something?” Annabelle Mason’s sweet voice asked in the darkness.

Everyone had been talking at once, blocking any outside noise. I suppose since Annabelle was our female vocalist, she may have had the most acute hearing. The area around the bus was heavily wooded, and the track took a sudden bend about a hundred yards from the crossing, so perhaps we can be excused for not hearing the train or seeing its lights until it was too late.

Someone in the back of the bus screamed, as we all looked to our right to see the approaching lights of what we at once recognized to be a train. It wasn’t moving terribly fast—probably under fifty miles an hour, but it would reach us in a matter of scant seconds. Given its momentum, the bus would be scrap metal in seconds, and as for its passengers...

It’s impossible for me to describe everything that happened in the next few moments. Urgent screams and shouts seemed to come from everywhere. Edgar was trying to get the bus door open, but in the panic-inducing darkness, he must have hit the wrong switch, for the door remained closed. Outside, the wail of the diesel’s horn became louder and shriller, compressed by the Doppler effect until it hurt our ears.

They say a person’s entire life flashes before him at the moment of certain death. I wouldn’t say that to be true, though. The only thing that rushed through my mind was relief. My life had become empty and meaningless, my family dead and my ministry a sham. I didn’t look forward to being reunited with my loved ones in a better world, for I didn’t believe in one. I merely wanted the pain to end but had never had the courage or determination to end it myself. The crushing blow of the train would be my salvation. I simply stared in fascination into the bright lights as they came closer and closer.

Then, something happened...

I didn't understand what was happening at the time. None of us did. How could we? We were facing certain death, and then the bus lurched at the very moment the train should have hit. The train's horn dropped in pitch as darkness replaced light behind the bus. We stood in disbelieving silence as the cars of the train rumbled past us in the night.

"The train must have pushed us off the tracks," Aden theorized softly.

"It must have," I agreed, equally softly.

"God was looking out for us," he pronounced. "He has a plan for us."

"Amen!" Marlin called out.

Annabelle began to sing in her strong soprano: "To God be the glory, great things He has done..."

The others chimed in at the second line: "So loved He the world that He gave us His son..."

I hoped they noticed that I wasn't singing. I didn't feel like singing praises to a non-existent deity. Even if He did exist, I had no reason to sing of his praises, for He had deprived me of the escape from this life that I so desperately craved.

My staff's joy was short-lived, though. As soon as Edgar managed to start the engine back up, he turned on the cabin lights. The singing stopped in mid-stanza as we looked around. When we had all boarded the bus, there had been fifteen of us representing all of the non-technical people in our crew. Now, there were only five of us.

"Where's everybody else?" Marlin asked, voicing what we had all been thinking.

"They must have gotten out through the emergency door in the rear," Aden suggested.

Edgar squelched that idea in a hurry. "I'd have a light on the panel indicating the door had been opened," he told us. "There's no light, though."

“But they had to have gotten out somehow,” I pointed out. “People don’t just disappear.”

“Oh my God!” Annabelle murmured. “You don’t suppose they got out through the rear and were hit by the train, do you?”

We all looked at each other in shock. Then Edgar opened the front door of the bus and scrambled out, the rest of us following closely on his heels. I was afraid we would find the bloody remains of our friends scattered along the path between the rear of the bus and the nearby railroad tracks. I tried to suppress the image of my wife’s body among the supposed wreckage of human flesh, as I had seen her in my mind after her own accident. I was afraid our friends would look much as she had looked when the truck hit her broadside, leaving her as a heap of unrecognizable carnage. I had been spared the actual sight of my dead wife immediately after the accident, but I had often imagined the image of her torn body in my mind.

To our surprise, there was no sign of the remains of our friends. The rear emergency door on the bus was undisturbed, and there was no evidence of any foot traffic behind the bus. To both our puzzlement and our relief, there were no mangled bodies to be seen.

We stood silently, the only sound being the chirp of insects and the distant rumble of the departing train. I don’t think any of us had the slightest notion as to what had happened to our friends. How could we? Even if we had known, we wouldn’t have believed it—then.

“I’m calling for help,” Aden finally announced, breaking the silence and whipping out his cell phone. He punched in 911 and waited for a reply. A moment later, he frowned. “No answer. There must not be any cell service here.”

“Just exactly where is here?” Marlin asked, looking around uncomfortably at the gloomy darkness around us.

“That’s Edgar’s department,” I told him.

We all looked at Edgar, who could only shrug. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “I think we must have missed the right road a while ago. I

haven't seen any road signs for the past thirty minutes, and nothing around here looks familiar."

"Come look at this!" Annabelle called from the bus. While we had been looking around, she had returned to the bus, probably to avoid the expected carnage from our missing friends.

We piled back on the bus. Annabelle was in the back of the cabin with a puzzled look on her face.

"What's wrong?" I asked, unable to see anything wrong. All we were staring at was empty bus seats.

"Don't you see?" she asked plaintively.

"I don't see anything," Aden said, looking around.

"That's just it!" she returned. "There's nothing here—no evidence that there was ever anyone here. There's no suitcases, no personal belongings... nothing."

"Maybe they took everything with them," Edgar theorized.

"Not likely," I commented, looking under one of the seats for some evidence of recent habitation. "We only had a few seconds of warning. Even if they managed to open the emergency door and get away, they wouldn't have had time to gather all of their belongings."

"Or close the rear door," Aden added.

"It's a miracle!" Annabelle declared. "Praise God." Sorry, I thought, I don't believe in miracles, but of course I didn't tell her that. I just murmured "amen" with the others. And while I didn't believe in miracles, I had to believe the evidence of my own eyes. Ten people had seemingly disappeared—or had they? We were all tired that evening—exhausted really. Had we just imagined that ten more of our number had boarded the bus with the five of us who remained? Mass delusions were possible: that was a proven fact. There was no other answer, really. Ten people and all of their belongings could simply not have vanished from the back of the bus.

But that begged the question: where had the other ten gone? If they

had never boarded the bus, where were they? Perhaps Edgar had mistakenly thought they were ensconced in the darkness at the back of the bus when he pulled out of the site of our ministry in Broken Bow. Of course if that was the case, why hadn't they called us? Surely the cell phones worked in Broken Bow.

Perhaps they had opted to go on the other bus—the one loaded with all of our props and equipment. That bus would be a couple of hours behind us. Maybe there was some miscommunication which made them think they were supposed to take the other bus. That would explain why they hadn't called us. They were probably sleeping peacefully on the second bus, unaware that we were concerned about them. It had to be that, I reasoned. There was no other reasonable solution.

I told the others as much. Annabelle and Marlin looked rather crestfallen at the suggestion that the answer was less than miraculous. Aden agreed, though. "As much as I would like to witness such a compelling miracle, I have to agree with Hans. Perhaps we should just be happy with the miracle we did indeed witness—our deliverance from an accident with the train. Only God's intervention could have caused the train to push us away like that."

"There's another miracle as well," Edgar called out from outside the bus door. None of us had realized he had even left. "I just checked the rear axle. I could have sworn it was broken, but it's just fine. When the train bumped us, it must have somehow shaken everything back into working order."

"Then we're not stranded?" I asked hopefully.

Edgar shook his head. "It doesn't look like it, but as soon as the shops open in Bartlesville tomorrow, I'd better take the bus in. If the axle is bent rather than broken, we'll get some uneven tire wear and a real bumpy ride."

In short order, we were moving again, but I doubted if any of us got any sleep. The road was too rough for sleeping: Edgar even had to swerve occasionally to avoid some of the larger ruts. Besides the

rough, rocky ride, each of us was undoubtedly thinking about our missing comrades. Sure, we knew it had to be just a mix-up. They had to be on the other bus. There was no other logical explanation.

How were we to know that logic had been stranded by the side of the road the moment we had turned off the main highway?

Eventually, the road smoothed out, and the countryside began to change, even in the darkness. Instead of negotiating tight curves through forested hills, we were back on a smoother road with the trees sufficiently thinned to give us a view of the lights of farms. It was too late (or rather too early in the morning) for the farmers to be up, but we could see security lights passing by our windows. It felt good to be back in civilization.

I took the jump seat behind Edgar. “Any idea where we are?”

“Not the foggiest,” he replied. “We need to get a GPS before our next tour.”

“It looks like there may be a town up ahead,” I told him, pointing at a cluster of lights ahead and to the right perhaps three or four miles away.

“Yeah. Then I can check the map and see where we are,” he said.

“Maybe we should cancel tonight’s service in Bartlesville. Everyone is going to be dead on their feet.”

“I wish I could,” I sighed, “but we need Bartlesville if we plan to make any money on this tour.” Attendance had been less than anticipated. There were just too many evangelists in the business, especially with the ones on TV and resident in the large city churches. Our take had been dropping for the past two years. It was only our own TV show that kept us in the black.

“There’s a sign,” Edgar nodded to our right. “‘Welcome to Ovid,’ it says.”

“Where’s Ovid?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know. I thought I knew every town in the state. It must be pretty small.”

But it didn't look that small. Oh, it wasn't a city certainly, but it looked to be a town of several thousand people, judging from how spread out the lights ahead were.

"At least the road is getting better," I noted as the lanes split forming a divided highway. Small roadside businesses were beginning to appear, reflected in the light of sodium vapor streetlights. They were closed, of course, but they looked well-kept enough to indicate that during the day, they did a brisk business. None of them appeared to be national franchises though, so I suspected the town wasn't quite as big as it looked.

"Looks like they roll up the sidewalks around here," Edgar commented, running a hand through his dark, thinning hair. "We seem to be the only vehicle on the road."

The roadside buildings became more clustered, until they were finally continuous. Traffic lights began to sprout up as well, and side streets sported awnings of trees—mostly oaks—that sheltered neat, modest houses reflected in the beam of the streetlights.

"Nice little town," I said to Edgar. He seemed about to reply when seemingly out of nowhere, a siren wailed and Edgar's balding head was reflected in alternating red and blue lights.

Edgar looked to his left. I followed his gaze to see a police car at our side. "Where did he come from?" Edgar wanted to know.

"Must have come in from a side street," Aden mused.

Maybe so, I thought, but wouldn't we have at least seen his headlights, or maybe the cruiser reflected in a streetlight? I had been looking down the side streets and had seen no sign of any traffic. I supposed it was possible that his lights had been out for some reason, and that he had been further back, out of the light.

Edgar pulled the bus to the curb, and we all felt the vehicle shudder as it had when we had found ourselves stranded at the railroad crossing. He cut the lights, opened the door and began rummaging around to find our registration. As for the police car, it had pulled up in front of us

and cut its engine, but left the intimidating lights on.

The figure that emerged from the police car was tall and slim, wearing a dark Stetson and an immaculate uniform consisting of what could have been either a gray or light blue shirt (it was hard to tell in the darkness) and dark trousers. But most surprising was the fact that although it was still night, he was wearing mirror shades with wire rims just like small town police always did in the movies.

He stepped onto the bus with what I thought was a foolish lack of caution. For all he knew, the bus could be loaded with a gang of desperate prison escapees, armed to the teeth and ready to cut him down before he could get both feet inside the door.

“G... good evening, Officer,” Edgar stuttered.

The officer nodded, turning his gaze away from Edgar and toward me. “Your bus has a bent axle,” he informed me laconically.

“We hit a large pothole just a few miles out of town,” I explained, relieved that he was just alerting us to the sorry condition of our axle—or so I thought.

“It’s illegal to drive a seriously-damaged vehicle in Ovid,” he informed us. “I’m going to have to take you in. The Judge will want to see you.”

“Officer,” I began, “we’re in a terrible hurry. We’re due to conduct a prayer meeting in Bartlesville this evening. If you’d just issue us a citation and tell us where we could rent say... a van to get to Bartlesville, you’d be helping us do the work of the Lord.”

“Sorry,” he responded without pausing even an instant to think about it. He didn’t sound sorry, though. Apparently he believed in the letter of the law more than he believed in the Lord. Given my own views on the subject, I supposed I couldn’t blame him.

Another police car pulled in just in front of the officer’s car. In my sleep-deprived mind, I giddily imagined a team of officers bounding out of the car, guns drawn with one screaming, “Drop that Bible and back away slowly!” Instead, no one got out of the car, but its presence was soon explained.

“Reverend Groenwald, if you, Reverend Cross, and Ms. Mason will come with me, your other staff members can ride in the other car.”

He knew our names? Oh, of course. The name of our program, *God Sees You* was emblazoned on the side of the bus, and the officer probably watched the show and knew who we were, I reasoned. Marlin was not as well-known, since the cameras would only briefly pan on our organist, and of course there was no reason why he would know our driver. But as I was soon to find out, it was very likely that the officer—Officer Mercer we would soon learn—knew more about everyone on the bus than we could have ever imagined.

The three of us sat together in the back seat of the police car for the short drive to see this judge. We were all from small towns, although Aden’s small town was in England, so his experiences may have been different. Annabelle, from her center seat, and I exchanged a knowing glance, though. We were familiar with the expression ‘speed trap.’ Small towns throughout America were often the home offices of such activities. A crooked judge and at least one greedy police officer were all that were required to fleece unwary motorists. We would be presented with trumped up charges and be offered to opportunity to pay a ‘fine’ that would never be entered in the records, but rather would be split between the judge and the police once we were out of town. The locals never minded much—as long as the scam didn’t involve arresting and fleecing them.

I only hoped that the fine was halfway reasonable. Since the officer had recognized us, there was a very good chance that he intended to shake us down more than the average motorist. Our current tour hadn’t been terrifically successful as it was, so a substantial fine would be felt sorely.

To take my mind off the ritual fleecing we were about to endure, I looked out the window at the town of Ovid. It was hard to tell much so late at night—or so early in the morning if you will. The houses we passed were dark, as all the good little Ovidians had to be snug in their beds, unaware (or unconcerned) regarding our plight. From what little I could see in the pale light of the streetlights, the houses were

neat and well maintained. I made a mental note to consider Ovid on next year's tour, since any small town where the houses were well-kept was probably a prosperous small town that would welcome our message with open wallets.

It wasn't long until we were pulling up in front of an impressive public building. It too, was dark—except for a few lights near the entrance. We were escorted into the building, and to no surprise, the lighted area turned out to be the Police Department. No one was tending the reception desk, and we soon realized that the officer who had arrested us would also be checking us in. Convenient, I thought. He would probably keep us in a holding area while he got his judicial counterpart out of bed for a quick and speedy trial that would see us on our way a number of dollars lighter before the local employees staggered into work—none the wiser that the shake down had even occurred.

Marlin and Edgar looked a little unsettled as the officer retired to an office, presumably to get some paperwork.

"What's wrong?" I asked Marlin, careful to speak softly so as not to be overheard by the officer.

"The cop who brought us down here..." he began.

"What about him?" I prompted.

"He's the same one as the one who brought you in," he finished nervously.

"Maybe he has a twin brother on the force," Aden suggested.

"Let's just hope he's a triplet and that his brother is the judge," I grumbled, looking at my watch. It was nearly three in the morning. I had a lunch meeting with the senior pastor of our sponsoring church in Bartlesville. At this rate, I wasn't going to get any sleep before our meeting. I'd be fortunate if I had a chance to shave and change my shirt at this rate. I recalled an old movie where the judge was called in wearing his nightshirt to hold a speedy trial. I sincerely hoped our judge would be equally anxious to shake us loose from our money and shoo us on our way.

The officer finished whatever he had been doing and called to us, "This way."

Any hope I had of being led immediately to a courtroom was dashed when I saw he was guiding us into a small, brightly-lit cell block. Disheartened, I rushed to the officer's side. "Look, Officer..."

"Mercer," he supplied, staring at me through his ever-present mirrored shades, his face expressionless.

"Officer Mercer," I acknowledged. "We have a prayer meeting in Bartlesville this evening, and really would appreciate it if we could just... pay a fine and be on our way. You see, I'm..."

"I know who you are, Reverend Groenwald," he broke in using that same neutral tone. "The Judge will hear your case first in the morning. That will be at nine."

"Nine! But I have to be in Bartlesville by noon!"

I almost thought I saw a thin smile on the officer's face. "I wouldn't worry about that, Reverend. Now, if you'll step inside this cell..."

Sighing, I obeyed. At least we were all given individual cells, and the way the doors faced, most of them offered a reasonable degree of privacy. Only Aden and I had cells that faced each other.

"At least we'll get some sleep," Aden sighed, sitting down on the small but clean bed. I did the same, surprised to find it was fairly comfortable. "Do you think we'll have to call off the Bartlesville event?"

"Let's hope not," was all I could reply.

I tried to get some sleep, but I was too keyed up from the night's events. Of primary concern, of course, was Aden's question. The Bartlesville event was to have been the crowning jewel in an otherwise mediocre tour. Rescheduling was out of the question. Summer was the best time for our events, and summer was all but over. Oh, we'd make do without Bartlesville, but it would be a long winter.

There was another concern keeping me awake, though. I could still

see the train bearing down on us, its lights strobing into our crippled bus, its horn blaring a warning which could not be heeded. Since the death of my family, I had always thought I was ready to die. Oh, I had no illusions about meeting them in a non-existent heaven. I merely felt there was nothing to live for.

But when the train missed us, mingled with the disappointment I had felt at not having the misery of my life end, I had felt something akin to relief. My conscious mind told me there was nothing to live for, and I had abided by its dictates since the deaths of my wife and unborn child. But the relief had come from somewhere deep within me—somewhere that a part of me wanted to live. Or at least somewhere that a part of me was afraid to die.

I had believed, once upon a time. People want to believe in a supreme being and a life eternal. Without them, the universe is without meaning and life had little purpose. The work I did as an evangelist was easy work, for people wanted to believe what I said—even if I didn't believe it myself. But most people don't just believe for believing's sake. They believe because there's a promise of a life beyond this one. It's quid pro quo really: 'Hey God, I'll believe in you and say the right prayers and sing the right hymns and you can assure me a cosy afterlife.'

Yes, I had believed that too, once upon a time, but no more. The upside of that was a sort of spiritual freedom to go my own way. But the downside of it, as I had learned as the train bore down on us, was that someday, without any warning probably, my life would be over and there would be nothing beyond. Eternal rest? Bah! Eternal nothingness awaited me.

Maybe, I rationalized, I was doing good work. I was convincing the rubes that there was something to look forward to after our lives. That would at least make them feel good, and when they died—nothing! But they'd take their dying breath waiting to be carried up to their Lord. Not a bad deal really, and I helped them think that way.

Looking back on my vigil that night, my thoughts were cynical and perhaps a little vain, but how was I to know how my beliefs—or rather lack of beliefs—were about to be shattered?

I did finally manage to doze off, but it was not a restful sleep. I was awakened shortly after the sunlight began to filter into the jail from an overhead skylight. The light was weak and indirect, so I suspected it was shortly after sunrise.

Officer Mercer called out to us, warning us that breakfast would be served in thirty minutes. I heard groans from the other cells.

“Can we get a shower and something to shave with before we go to court today?” I called out.

He turned to face me with what I believed to be a thin smile on his lips, but since his eyes were still covered by the sunglasses, I couldn’t tell if he was amused by something I had said or not. “You won’t need to shave. You’ll be fine as you are.”

“It’s like some third world jail,” Aden grumbled. When I looked at him quizzically, he continued, “If you deny the prisoner any dignity before dragging him into the courtroom, you keep him off balance. He’ll be tired and uncomfortable, and to any spectators, he’ll look more like a shiftless bum than one of them. It makes it easier to intimidate him and easier for everyone else to see him as unlike them.”

“But this isn’t the third world,” I pointed out. “It’s Oklahoma.”

“Same thing,” Annabelle commented, lifting our spirits just a little with her humor. She had once told me that down in Texas, where she was born and raised, they tell Oklahoma jokes.

We each chuckled just a little, and I could hear running water from the small sinks in our cells. I too, did my best to refresh myself. Wiping the water over my stubbled face made me once again wish for a razor. I had never liked facial hair and often wished that I didn’t have to shave my face. Well, as Oscar Wilde once said, be careful what you wish for—you might get it.

I don’t know about other people who have stumbled into Ovid over the years, but I for one, was able to tell the exact moment when things went tilt. I was pretty hungry, so I was listening carefully for any

indication that our breakfast had arrived. My nose detected our breakfast first though, as someone was apparently arranging trays on a cart to serve us. I could smell bacon, cinnamon, and fresh coffee, and my stomach began to growl in anticipation.

But the minute I saw the girl who was serving us, I forgot my hunger at once. Now, up until that moment, everything had seemed pretty normal to me. To my mind, we had just gotten scooped up in some small town speed trap, and had been jailed over night to make us more amenable to making a deal just to get released. All that was irritating, but not entirely unheard of in the small towns that dotted the Bible Belt. But this...

The girl who cheerfully slid our breakfast trays through the narrow slot in the door was young and attractive, red hair arranged in a neat ponytail and casually dressed in a denim dress with a short, fairly tight skirt. She smiled as she slid my tray to my awaiting hands. It was all very normal and comfortable, except for one thing...

The girl was transparent.

That's probably a bit of an overstatement. It wasn't as if I could see Aden through her, so much as I could see Aden in spite of her being in the way. It's hard to explain to anyone who hasn't experienced the phenomenon, but there it was.

The look on Aden's face was every bit as incredulous as mine. He at least had a moment to recover though, so by the time the girl had delivered his tray to him, he was more curious than shocked. He inspected the girl carefully.

"I thought you were all men of the Lord," she drawled in the distinctive Oklahoma accent. "Should you be looking at me like that?"

"I... I'm sorry," Aden stammered. I know he wanted to ask her about her condition, but how do you ask someone why they are semi-transparent? There didn't seem to be anything to say.

Once she had served all of us and left, Aden and I looked over at each other, our trays balanced on our laps as we picked at the food.

“Did you see that, too?” Aden asked.

“See what?” Myron called out from his cell around the corner.

“The girl,” Aden managed to say.

“Very attractive,” Myron returned.

“Sure is!” Edgar chimed in.

“You men!” Annabelle exclaimed.

“No,” I broke in, since Aden seemed to be unable to say it. “Aden means did you notice you could see right through her?—sort of?”

“Reverend, that’s not a very nice thing for a man of God to say,” Annabelle chastised.

Seeing what she meant, I hurried to say, “No, that isn’t what I mean. Didn’t you notice? She was nearly transparent.”

“Yes!” Aden managed, looking relieved that someone besides he had noticed.

Our clarification was met by silence.

“We... didn’t notice a thing,” Myron replied hesitantly, speaking it seemed for everyone but Aden and me.

The proverbial chill went racing up and down my back, and a glance at Aden told me he was experiencing something very similar. His eyes told me there was no sense in discussing it further until we could talk in private. Otherwise, our friends would just assume that too little sleep had addled our brains.

That opportunity came very soon. We had no sooner finished breakfast before Officer Mercer entered the cell block. By my watch, it was a quarter until nine, and I suspected he was coming to take us to trial.

The walk to the courtroom was short, but Aden and I fell back a little from the others where we were rewarded with a few moments to discuss what we had seen.

“Do you think... it’s the work of the devil?” he asked. I knew Aden

believed fervently in our ministry, so it wasn't much of a reach for him to assume that God and the devil were actively at war in our world. Frankly, I believed even less in the devil than I did in God. Sure, there was good and evil in the world, but mankind didn't need divine beings to put it there.

"I don't think there's evil involved," I replied in a low tone, matching Aden's. At least, my response was truthful. That sweet girl who had delivered our meals didn't look as if she had an evil thought in her head. Besides, none of the others had noticed anything wrong—only Aden and I. It was possible, I had to admit to myself, that the girl's transparency was merely a trick of the light, or perhaps our exhaustion had led to the illusion.

But if that were so, how had Aden and I both noticed the phenomenon?

I didn't have much time to think on it, for at that moment, Aden and I followed our friends into the courtroom. I was suddenly too busy taking in my surroundings. The room was far better appointed than I would have thought likely in a small town like Ovid. Fine, expensive green carpet covered the floors, and oak wainscoting graced the walls. The judge's bench looked imposing, raised above the room in a stately manner. Even the defense and prosecution tables were of well-turned oak, and the chairs provided were plush with cushions of the same green shade as the carpet. The room was practically empty. Although not an attorney, I knew that was not uncommon. Many—if not most—trials have no spectators at all. Ours it appeared, was to have only one. An attractive blonde woman, probably in her mid to late thirties, was seated primly in the back row. From her attire—a conservative gray suit with matching heels—I assumed her to be an attorney herself, probably there to file a motion or something.

The other woman in the room sat at the defendant's table. She was attractive and probably mid-thirties as well, but with her darker hair drawn up in a professional style and her well-tailored navy blue suit, I had no doubt that she was an attorney.

"Susan Jager," she announced, holding out a feminine hand for me to

shake. "I'll be your attorney today."

"Do we really need legal representation?" Aden asked as I shook her hand. "Surely this is a minor offense."

"Yes," I agreed. "We'd like to just pay whatever fine the court feels reasonable..."—in other words, whatever the going rate for small town speed traps was—"and be on our way. You see, we're due in Bartlesville today."

Ms. Jager seemed to be stifling a smile. "I'm afraid you're unlikely to get to Bartlesville today," she informed us.

"But we must!" I insisted. "It's very important. We need to minister to a large number of Christian worshipers this evening."

All right. I was shamelessly appealing to her religious instinct, but it came out sounding like Dan Akroyd's, "We're on a mission from God."

"Reverend Groenwald," she began slowly, "you'd do well to be less insistent when The Judge comes in. He's been in a rather poor mood lately. Please let me speak for you."

"Impossible!" I said, somewhat petulantly. "Admittedly, we're at your mercy here, but a sham trial is unnecessary. Just ask this judge how much the fine is, we'll pay it without a whimper, and be on our way."

"All rise!" a voice intoned from one side of the bench. It was Officer Mercer again. Apparently he acted as bailiff—probably so the take would have to be split among fewer people. "Municipal Court of Ovid, Oklahoma, is now in session, The Honorable Judge presiding."

I realized we would gain nothing now by arguing. With our attorney and my associates, I turned to face what I suspected would be a crotchety old small-town municipal judge with avarice clearly reflected in his expression as he prepared to shake down yet another unsuspecting group of strangers. At least, I thought hopefully, the process would be short and sweet and we'd soon be on our way.

To my surprise, he looked nothing like I would have expected. He was younger than I expected—early middle age and no more, judging by his dark hair and neatly-trimmed beard salted with flecks of gray. He wore

glasses, and I recognized the frames as expensive gold rims. In his black robe, he looked more like a distinguished Federal judge rather than a municipal magistrate, and I found myself wondering what such an imposing individual was doing holding court in a town so small that none of us had ever heard of it.

“Be seated,” he intoned in a voice that seemed to command obedience. As one, we all sat, as if we were children under the tutelage of a stern headmaster. It seemed so natural, I didn’t think much of it at the time. Now, of course, I know better.

The Judge (for I now began to think of ‘Judge’ as more than just a title: he was The Judge) looked down at the papers before him. Grunting, he looked up. “Call the defendants.”

Officer Mercer formally called, “The court calls Hans Groenwald and associates before the court.”

Ms. Jager rose promptly. “Your Honor, I represent Mr. Groenwald and his associates.”

“Do you have a plea?”

I sighed. This was all way too formal. Why not just get on with it and fine us? I shifted impatiently while our attorney, without any input from us, entered a “Not Guilty” plea and soon completed all the formalities with The Judge. It all seemed as if it were a set piece—some charade conducted for our benefit to make it seem valid. It was a ritual—yes, a ritual, just like the opening of church services. They, too, were nothing more than a charade when I thought about it. In a way then, I was on familiar ground. I relaxed a little as at last, we were ready to get down to the case.

“Reverend Groenwald!” The Judge said sharply. When I looked up, he motioned for me to stand.

“Yes, Your Honor?” I asked once I was on my feet.

“Do you understand the nature of the charges?”

We had been charged with driving an unsafe vehicle, as well as a couple of other minor traffic violations associated with our crippled

vehicle. It was all proper—or appeared to be so. I said the only thing I could think of to get the proceedings moving along smartly. With any luck, we would still make Bartlesville in time for a late lunch with our sponsor. “Yes I do, Your Honor.”

“Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

“Not really, Your Honor,” I sighed. “I would just like to change our plea to guilty and pay our fine. It’s very important that we be in Bartlesville tonight. We are doing the Lord’s work there.”

There, I thought. That should get him moving. In my experience, few people—even judges—chose to interfere in religious activities. I suppose it was all the separation of church and state business. Unfortunately, I had guessed wrong this time.

The Judge frowned. “The Lord’s work?” His tone was derisive. I hadn’t expected that—not for a second.

Well, in for a penny in for a pound. It would be just our luck to draw a man who was possibly the only atheist on the bench in the state of Oklahoma. I didn’t realize at the time that it wasn’t God he was sneering at. “Yes, Your Honor. Perhaps you didn’t realize it, but I am...”

“I know exactly who you are, Reverend Groenwald,” he broke in, his tone bordering on angry. “But why should I be solicitous of a man who hides behind the name of a god he does not believe in?”

I heard loud gasps from my party, and I had to fight down the urge to gasp myself. Nothing, though, could have prevented the icy shiver that sped down my back. The Judge was right, of course, but how could he know? Perhaps he was guessing: perhaps he had seen something in my delivery on my program and surmised that I had lost my faith. I felt I had no chance but to bluff my way out of this situation. It was, of course, the wrong thing to do, but obviously at that point I had no idea who I faced.

“God knows who the faithful are,” I pronounced carefully, hoping that he hadn’t noticed that I had neither confirmed or denied his

accusation. I stood stiffly, as if affronted by his remarks. I only hoped my associates would take the red flush on my face to be one of righteous indignation rather than the blush of embarrassment.

"Indeed God does know," The Judge agreed with evident sarcasm.

"Your Honor," our attorney interposed, trying vainly to achieve some modicum of control over what appeared to be a rapidly deteriorating situation, "perhaps we should review the facts of the case."

"I believe I understand what's happening here," The Judge snapped, but while his remarks were aimed at our attorney, his gaze was fixed on me.

Just our luck, I thought to myself. Even an atheist would have been better. An atheist might have been more cautious dealing with a religious leader. Instead, we had to draw a Bible-thumping judge with an agenda. If word of his accusations got outside that courtroom, I'd be ruined. The media loves nothing better than to bring down a fundamentalist minister over either sex or money. While I hadn't exactly misused the funds I had collected in my ministry, I had lived fairly well. To expose my hypocrisy would be the fresh meat the media craved.

"I find the defendants guilty!" The Judge growled, surprising all of us with his abruptness. I was actually a little relieved, though, for although his self-righteousness would probably give him a reason to substantially raise our fine, it meant we could be on our way.

"Sentence is to be carried out at once."

With that, The Judge's eyes bored into us, and he began to speak in what at first I thought were tongues, but I was familiar enough with the practices of Pentecostals to realize that what he spoke was something else. It sounded a bit like Latin, but not the dull, lifeless language recited by Catholic priests. Instead, the words were rich in texture, invoking exactly what I couldn't say, but the words were causing my skin to tingle.

I looked around at my associates, and got my first inkling that something terribly wrong was happening. Myron, Edgar, and

Annabelle were becoming smaller as I watched. Their eyes were glazed over, as if they had no understanding of what was happening to them.

Aden, on the other hand, was actually becoming larger, but his features were changing. His hair was changing from a sandy brown to a coal black, and his skin was becoming darker. He looked more Mediterranean than English. Also, his clothes were changing—not radically, but I could see his white shirt darkening and becoming a t-shirt, while his khaki slacks were changing into denim.

It was at that moment that I realized I too, must be changing. Mustering as much mental resistance as I could, I tried to keep my body from altering. At first, I thought I was actually succeeding, and perhaps, I reasoned, I did delay the effects somewhat. In retrospect, I think The Judge was intentionally slowing my changes until he could speak more with me.

“Remove them from the courtroom,” The Judge ordered Officer Mercer, but when the policeman started to take my arm, he amended, “No, take the others. I’m not finished with our ‘evangelist’ yet.”

I managed to turn my head enough to watch the strange officer usher a tall, dark young man in a dark red t-shirt and jeans, followed by three children who all appeared to be about ten. One was a boy, who looked on in disgust as two pre-teen girls walked just ahead of him, giggling and looking back at him with girlish interest. None of them paid any attention to me—except for the dark young man, who managed to glance over his shoulder to look back at me for just a moment.

But where were my people? Who were these strangers and where had they come from?

The Judge either anticipated my questions or read my mind, waiting only until the door had closed behind the small procession before explaining, “Those people were your associates.”

“What have you done to them?” I asked, my voice suddenly sounding too high-pitched.

The Judge shrugged. "I've given them new lives. Their old ones are no longer appropriate."

"And what was wrong with their old ones?" I returned, trying in vain to pitch my voice lower. Yes, I knew I was transforming as well, but I was too frightened and too angry to worry about my own changes.

"Left on your own, you would have been hit by a train," he explained calmly. "The train would have split your bus in two, the back half being pushed away from the tracks with all of its passengers virtually unharmed. The front of the bus, where you and your friends here today would have been was torn apart. There would have been no survivors. We rescued you. Now don't look so sceptical. You don't really think your driver was able to perform a miracle and get your damaged bus off the tracks, do you?"

I said nothing, but now that he mentioned it, it seemed unlikely Edgar had been able to move us out of harm's way. He had seemed as shocked as any of us when the train missed us, assuming that the train had somehow pushed us to safety.

"Your lives belong to Ovid now," The Judge continued with an ominous tone.

"Someone will come looking for us," I reminded him. "There were other people on that bus who survived. They'll tell the authorities. And we were expected in Bartlesville..."

"No one remembers you," The Judge countered. "As far as the world outside Ovid is concerned, you never existed. The other riders on your bus who would have survived the accident have had their lives altered so that they were never with you on that bus. They never worked with you. In fact, they never even met any of you, for none of you exist in their world." When I said nothing, he continued, "I have something special in mind for you—something very appropriate."

I could feel hair trickling down my neck now, and something was rising up on my chest. Although I couldn't move enough to look down, I realized I was growing breasts. From the weight tugging on my chest, I estimated them to be good-sized. Quick, sharp pains erupted in my

earlobes, and I could feel something tugging ever so slightly against them.

I suppose I was too stunned to really think about what was happening to me. Instead, all I could do was note the sensations as they occurred. My sex was being changed as I stood there: there was little doubt of that. In moments, I would be completely female. Strangely, my body reacted to this thought, and to my shame, I became very hard—as hard as I had been in years. That sensation changed as well though, ebbing almost as quickly as it had begun, and I felt... different between my legs.

So what sort of a woman was I becoming? I could tell I was getting shorter, but I didn't seem to have lost so much stature as to be considered a child again like most of my friends. Then I felt the same type of pain coming from my belly button that I had felt moments before in my earlobes. So my navel was now pierced as well, indicating to me that I was probably going to be a younger woman. Not many matronly women of my acquaintance had pierced navels.

In fact, my stomach seemed bare, exposed to the open air as my shirt crawled up my body and my pants seemed to settle lower. I could feel air on my legs as well, and it didn't take much thought for me to realize I was now wearing a skirt—a very, very short skirt from the feel of air well up my thighs.

Then the sensations of change happened so quickly, I couldn't keep up with them. My hair seemed to be growing longer, covering suddenly bared shoulders. Something was pushing against the front of my shirt, if what I was now wearing could be called a shirt. My new breasts were growing uncomfortably larger. A quick look down confirmed that. They were pressing against what I saw to be a red halter-top, and the speed with which they were swelling made me fear that they might burst right through the material. Given the skimpy nature of my top, a significant amount of smooth breast flesh was now exposed, and I had cleavage that would be the envy of many a girl.

Overlaying the physical sensations that were rippling over my body was the sound of my mind screaming that none of this was possible.

Yes, I know, some fundamentalists are convinced that there is evil magic—the Devil’s magic—out there in the world, competing for the souls of men. If I had chosen not to believe in a god, though, I had certainly chosen not to believe in a Devil. And I certainly didn’t believe in magic...

So that’s when my mind snapped.

No, I didn’t go into a catatonic state, but suddenly, I felt as if none of what was happening could possibly be real. My faith in the lack of gods, devils and magic was rooted in years of practice. This could not really be happening, regardless of what my senses told me, but since I couldn’t deny what my senses were relaying to my overtaxed brain, I did the one thing I could do to reconcile the contradiction.

I passed out.

I awoke slowly. I was lying on a bed, confirming to my jumbled mind that I had just awakened from the most bizarre dream of my life. It was an unfamiliar room, but for anyone who has spent a significant portion of his or her life travelling, it was not a unique experience. Lying there in what appeared to be the dim light of early evening, I concluded I must be resting in a hotel room in Bartlesville, making up some of the sleep I had lost in our harrowing overnight trip.

I tried to recall getting into Bartlesville and checking into our hotel, but nothing came to me. All I could remember was the strange dream of finding ourselves in Ovid where some incredibly powerful judge had transformed me and my associates. But that was impossible of course.

Of course...

Hesitantly, I raised a hand and touched my chest—and nearly passed out again. Not only did I have the breasts of a woman, I had large breasts—very, very large breasts. Okay, I suppose that’s something of an exaggeration. Later, I discovered my breasts were 36C—ample, but not exactly gargantuan. But for a man to reach down on his chest and find two large mounds of flesh residing where they shouldn’t be was enough to make me think my chest was downright deformed.

I jumped up out of bed—a questionable move considering I hadn't anticipated the movement of my breasts. Suddenly, it was as if my entire body submitted to gravity in ways I could have never dreamed possible. The weight on my chest flopped downward, caught by my halter-top but shifting uncomfortably nonetheless. Flesh seemed to pool at my hips and butt as well, although not nearly to the same degree. And finally, long, dark hair flew into my face, momentarily obscuring my vision. I pushed the hair from my face, nearly tangling a few strands in what I realized were long fingernails.

"My God!" I cried out, hearing for the first time my fully female voice. It was even higher and softer than when I spoke my last remarks to The Judge. I was used to a commanding baritone, perfectly suitable for my chosen profession. Now, I sounded like a chirpy little teen in one of those family sit-coms.

I spotted a full-length mirror on the back of the door to my room. In it, I could see a terrified girl, perhaps eighteen or so, wearing the red halter-top I had seen in court and a tiny black skirt that barely covered my new sex. She had all the trimmings as well—hoop earrings about an inch in diameter, a small women's watch on her left wrist, two gold bracelets on her right wrist, and a small gold locket attached around her neck by a thin gold chain. The locket actually drew the eyes down to some very pronounced cleavage peeking over the halter-top.

I approached the mirror, looking more closely at this attractive girl that I had now become. She was... voluptuous—that was the word. Her breasts and hips exuded femininity that her revealing clothing did little to mitigate. She... I... could have graced the centerfold of any men's magazine.

I looked closer still in the mirror, noting for the first time that I wore makeup—and not just makeup in the sense of a little lipstick, but rather the whole package. My eyes were accented with dark lines and feathered black and reddish eye shadow. My lips were absolutely glossy. My cheeks had been accented. None of this looked particularly slutty, but I didn't exactly look like the girl next door either—unless one lived in a rather rough neighborhood.

Who was I? I knew I had been thrust into an unwanted life. The room was decorated in a very personal fashion, and I was sure I was supposed to be the resident. That meant I had been given a fully furnished life, but whose?

Then I spotted a purse lying on a nearby desk. It was nestled among what appeared to be textbooks, but its deep red color stood out among them. Nervously, I picked it up with a narrow, feminine hand. I noted, with more than a little relief, that I wasn't wearing colored nail polish, although my fingernails were cut and filed in a feminine fashion, and the glisten of the nails meant I was wearing clear polish.

Opening the purse, I removed a brown leather women's wallet, opening it to see if there was any identification to tell me who I was. As it turned out, there were two IDs on top of the others. Both were Oklahoma driver's licenses. One showed me to be a girl of nineteen while the other declared me to be twenty-one. The one stating my age as nineteen was in the name of Joan Marie Sheppard. The other one gave my name as Alison MacDonald. The picture on it looked a little like my new face, but not quite.

I knew of course, that the one showing me to be nineteen was correct. The other one was obviously a phony for getting into bars where the legal age was twenty-one. I had never had a phony ID back in college, but I knew guys who did. Most of them were a little on the wild side. Did that mean the girl I had become was on the wild side, too? Probably, I thought to myself.

The purse contained a wealth of information. Under the driver's licenses was a college ID for a Capta College. It wasn't a school I had heard of, but apparently it was right there in Ovid. According to the card, I was a sophomore and lived in Athens Hall, apparently one of the campus dorms. At least now I knew where I was. Another card showed me to be a member in good standing of the First Baptist Church of Ovid, although my address was different. Either I had recently moved, or I was a local resident. If that were the case, I wondered why I was living in a dorm?

The rest of the contents of the wallet consisted of the usual items—a

Social Security card, a medical insurance card, a couple of credit cards and an ATM card, and about fifteen dollars in cash. However The Judge had done all of this, I had to admit it was impressive. I had apparently been thrust into a new life that was completely furnished—identity, credit cards, and the works.

My thoughts were interrupted by an impatient knock on the door. “Joanie! You didn’t fall asleep in there, did you?” a girl’s voice called out derisively.

I thought about not answering the door at all, but I realized I was going to have to come to terms with what had happened to me eventually. Maybe the girl knocking on my door knew something about what had happened to me. Hesitantly, I opened the door.

The girl in the doorway was dressed in a very similar fashion to my own attire, only the colors differing—her top was white and her miniscule skirt a denim blue. Red hair cascaded down her back and over her shoulders, and her freckles seemed to dance with her grin.

Oh yes, and she was transparent.

“Hey, girl!” she laughed.

“Hey yourself,” I replied, having no idea of course, who or even what she was.

“Are you ready to par-tay?”

“Huh?”

The smile disappeared. “Oh shit, girl! You didn’t forget about our dates with those two Delts, did you? You weren’t that drunk last night.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed, trying to cover my faux pas. “No, no, I didn’t forget.” Instinctively, I slipped into a pair of inch-high heels lying beside my bed.

“Then let’s go,” she urged, tugging my arm. “We’re already fashionably late.” Okay, I need to make one thing clear: I had absolutely no desire to ‘par-tay,’ but I had a sneaky hunch I’d better stay in character. Whatever The Judge had done to me and my

friends had thrust us into a new reality where we were accepted by others (including the transparent people) as the persons we now appeared to be. Apparently Joan Sheppard liked to party, and anything I did out of character might be noted by my new friend. I had to play my part or I might find myself thrown into Ovid's version of the loony bin. I just thought it was better to play along for the moment.

It wasn't as hard as it sounds. Sure, by most people's standards, I had been a goody-goody type in my college days, and given that I had attended Oral Roberts University, that was saying something. But that didn't mean that I wasn't observant. I had a fair idea how young party girls acted. As long as I acted a little empty-headed and giggled a bit, I should be able to pass.

The act was made even easier by the fact that when I sort of mentally drifted, my new body seemed to operate on its own instincts. That meant I had no trouble walking in heels, or even giving a little extra wiggle to my walk. I certainly wasn't in Paris Hilton's league, but at least I didn't appear out of character.

There were a few things I was worried about, though. First of all, I resolved that no matter how much of a party girl my new identity was, I would not smoke, drink, or take drugs. Two of the three, it turned out, would not be a problem, since smoking and drugs were not available in Ovid. Apparently The Judge ran a clean little town when it came to some of humanity's baser vices. As for drinking though...

My companion's little Jetta pulled up in front of a roadside bar called *Randy Andy's*. Judging from the cars parked all around sporting Capta College window stickers and the noise of a crowd inside, this *Randy Andy's* was apparently a favorite college hangout.

"Come on!" she sang out, jumping out of the car. I followed her example, nearly tripping between sliding out of the car seat in a short, tight skirt and catching my balance on my heeled leather sandals. Apparently my instinctive balance in high heels wasn't exactly perfect, but what woman's was? Fortunately, my companion didn't notice. She was too busy scanning the parking lot.

“They’re here!” she squealed, pointing at a fairly new black Ford pickup truck. “That’s Danny’s truck.”

I dutifully followed her as she walked past two college-aged boys who were heading out to their car. They gave her an appreciative glance as they passed. To my chagrin, I was pretty sure they transferred their gaze to me when I walked past. I had the sudden realization that I was on the menu now.

To my surprise and relief, the bar didn’t smell of tobacco smoke. I had never smoked and had tried drinking in a bar only once in my life, but that experience had taught me that most bars are soaked in the fumes of stale cigarette smoke. The music was strictly country-western, but more cross-over than down-home. As for the crowd, the window stickers had said it all. Rather than a pack of dull-witted losers, most of the patrons looked as if they were strictly middle-class college students letting off a little steam.

My new friend skipped merrily over to a nearby booth, where a young man dressed in a Capta College t-shirt and jeans jumped up and embraced her. It was funny the way her transparent form and his solid one naturally seemed to meet. While a goodly number of the residents of Ovid were somewhat transparent, they were apparently solid to the touch. She reciprocated, throwing her arms around his neck and attacking his lips so fiercely his head seemed to be thrown back a little.

When they broke apart, he turned to me. “Hey, Joanie.”

“Hi... Danny,” I managed, realizing that was who he had to be.

“Hey,” he mumbled a little uncomfortably. “This is Mitch.” He nodded at the transparent guy sitting across from him in the booth. “He’s a fraternity brother of mine. Sherrie told you about him.”

Okay, so my friend’s name was Sherrie. I turned my attention to Mitch, realizing with a sinking feeling that he was my blind date. Great. I had been a girl for just a few hours and already someone had lined me up with a date. I had to get out of that bar and get back to see The Judge. There had to be something I could say to him that would cause him to

release me from what was rapidly turning into a living hell.

Mitch was going to be a problem: I could see that in a heartbeat. It wasn't just because he was a guy and I was now a girl. That would have been problem enough. No, Mitch looked like trouble. He was handsome—I'll give him that. That wasn't my newfound girlhood rising to the challenge. He was one of those guys that even another man can tell is handsome—sort of like Brad Pitt. In fact, he looked a little like Brad Pitt—or at least what Brad Pitt would look like with way too much to drink.

It was obvious he and Danny had been drinking for a while, but while Danny still appeared okay, in spite of the two empty beer bottles in front of him, Mitch was weaving a little when he got up from his seat.

I thought at first he was just being a gentleman. Silly me. He lunged for me, throwing a beefy arm around my waist. "Hey, babe." The beer fumes would have exploded if he had come near a lit match. He practically shoved me into the booth and sat down beside me, blocking my only potential exit. "Hey! Another round over here," he called out. "And bring two for the girls."

A waitress in a revealing blouse and short black skirt appeared at our table. She was another one of the transparent people. "Let's see some ID's first," she demanded, pushing a lock of long, blond hair back over her ear.

I knew to give her the phony ID. She didn't scrutinize it very carefully, but the picture of Alison looked enough like me to pass in the dim light of the bar. She looked a little closer at Sherrie's picture, which I suspected was as bogus as mine. At last, though, she nodded and trotted off to get us our beers. I was a little disappointed, though. After all, if she had thrown us out of the bar, I wouldn't have to put up with Mitch. Besides, I have always hated the taste of beer.

As for putting up with Mitch, it didn't take me long to realize what a terrible problem a girl has when she's with a boy she'd rather have never met. When I had been a young man in college, I can remember how nervous and shy I was on most of my dates. I would stiffly put my

arm around a girl's waist, half expecting her to run away screaming. In fact, Melody—my wife—was the first girl I ever dated where the physical contact seemed natural. So if close physical contact had felt uncomfortable to me as a man, imagine how odious it was to me in my strange new body.

Not that Mitch would have noticed. He and Danny were talking sports—Capta's prospects for the fall football season especially—while he absently draped a strong arm around my shoulders, then slipped it down to my waist. Every now and then he'd shift, and the shifting almost always involved brushing one of my breasts. I'd squirm and try to get away—moving forward against the table, or scooting over toward the wall—but no matter what I did, his arm would find its way back to me.

As I've mentioned, I don't particularly like beer—or at least I hadn't before my transformation. Maybe it was the result of my changed body, but I had to admit the cold brew actually tasted pretty good. In addition, the alcohol seemed to take the edge off my shattered nerves. I lost count of how many we had. I thought it was only three, but Sherrie later told me I had downed at least five. I suppose I can be forgiven for not remembering, given my confused state of mind.

The combination of my transformation and the beer amplified the sense of unreality regarding what had happened to me. Several gulps of beer later, I began to feel as if I wasn't really there, and that I was a detached viewer, observing some crass movie where two well-built college guys were sexually mauling two vacuous coeds. It was like the R-rated version of a beer commercial.

What I have from that night amounted more to impressions rather than memories. I recall that Mitch's touch was suddenly less unpleasant. The sensations then moved to somewhat pleasant, until finally I looked down and noticed his thumb idly rubbing one of my nipples. At the moment, it didn't feel bad at all. In fact, it felt downright good.

Since I had never been drunk in my entire life, I really didn't realize what was happening to me. The beer had actually tasted good—natural, even. And one beer didn't seem to have that much of an effect

on me. Even two seemed fine. Or was it three? In any case, the Joan part of me apparently took control after the first couple of beers, while the good reverend in me sort of zoned out.

Then the scene shifted. We were no longer in the bar, and Sherrie and Danny were nowhere to be seen. I was riding in the front seat of a car—no a truck—the wind whipping my long hair about my face. Then Mitch slipped a beer bottle under my nose. Without a thought, I took it and swallowed half of it, expertly sticking half of the bottle's long neck past my lips and down my throat in what I later realized must have been an incredibly suggestive manner.

Then the scene changed again. Even in my inebriated state, I gasped in shock at where I had suddenly awakened. I was lying in bed—whose bed I wasn't certain—with my legs spread apart and significant weight pressing down on me, uncomfortably smashing my new breasts. I gasped again in sheer terror as I realized what was happening. My eyes slowly focused on Mitch's face, rising and falling away from me as something pressed itself inside me.

"Yeah, baby!" Mitch groaned, apparently mistaking my gasps for expressions of pleasure.

I know, given my background to date, that I should say Mitch was "making love" to me, but what he was doing, hammering into me like a pile driver could hardly be called "love." Let's be honest—I was being fucked (as unusual as it was for me to think of it in such crass terms) hard. And to make matters worse, I have to admit it wasn't all that unpleasant, either.

Sure, even in my alcohol-fogged mind, I felt dirty. I felt what I was doing—or perhaps I should say what was being done to me—was wrong, but it felt, well... it felt good. Not great, mind you, but good. Or at least part of it felt good. He was rubbing against my clitoris with each thrust, causing tiny waves of shivering pleasure to radiate through my body, but inside me, I felt as if her was going to piston completely through my body—not a pleasant experience, I can assure you.

“Baby, I’m coming!” he gasped, as if he needed to tell me. A throbbing feeling, followed by a warm, full sensation, gave me the general idea. When he was done, he rolled off me, a bit of discomfort accompanying his rapid exit. There was to be no cuddling as well, it seemed, as he rolled over at once and began to snore softly within what seemed to be seconds.

I drifted off, too, but not with the same apparent satisfaction he had experienced. I wasn’t so drunk that I didn’t know what had just happened to me. I drifted off into an alcohol-induced sleep with tears in my eyes.

When I woke the next morning, I would have given anything to be allowed a few more hours of dreamless sleep. I felt sick: my head was pounding, my stomach was upset, and something felt sticky between my legs. All that was bad enough, but when I felt the hair matted along my cheek, the unnatural weight on my chest, and the lack of any external sensation between my legs, my day in court and its aftermath all came back to me.

My time with Mitch was sort of indistinct, but the snatches of memory I garnered, coupled with the stickiness between my legs, were enough to tell me more than I wanted to know.

How could I have been so stupid?

Never in all my days—my male days, that is—had I ever done anything like that. Sure, I had tried drinking in college, but found the effects of alcohol less than pleasing. By the time I had graduated, I didn’t drink at all—a definite plus for me by the time I attended seminary.

As for sex, well, as I’ve mentioned before, I had been rather shy as a young man. I went to my wedding bed as much a virgin as my bride. Unlike alcohol, I had found sex a pleasant experience, but the idea of casual animal sex such as I had participated in the night before had never even occurred to me. It seemed The Judge had not only changed me into a girl—he had changed me into a beer-guzzling, wanton creature.

Or had he?

Analyzing my state of mind the day of my transformation, I was in what could best be described as severe shock. I hadn't known what to do or how to do it. I had simply been dropped into another life and tried to follow someone else's lead in an attempt to be normal. There had been no compulsion to drink myself into oblivion, and the sex that I had apparently participated in had been nothing more than a combination of shock and alcohol.

I would never, ever do anything like that again! I swore to myself.

Groaning, I pulled back the covers and sat up on the side of the bed, realizing for the first time that I had gone to bed naked, leaving a trail of soiled clothing from the door to the bed. Had I been fucked in my own bed? Maybe. I didn't remember coming back to my room, but I would imagine that in my wasted state of mind, I had no idea where any nightclothes were stored and decided to sleep in the nude. That was another bad habit I vowed to change.

I staggered into the bathroom, took a couple of Excedrin, and plopped down on the toilet. It took a moment to get things flowing, but I managed. I was sure it wasn't the first time I had urinated, given the beer that I drank the night before, but memories in the ladies room were hazy at best. Unconsciously, I wiped. I think it was then that I realized again that if I let my thoughts drift for a few moments, my body would automatically do what it was supposed to do.

Maybe, I thought to myself, my drinking binge and (shudder) my sexual escapades were the direct result of the same sort of automatic response. That would be both good news and bad news. The good news was that I wasn't entirely responsible for the previous evening's bad behavior. The bad news was that if I relaxed my mental control for even a short time, I might do it all over again.

What sort of being would have such power to be able to change me from the nearly middle-aged man I had been into a young coed? Just as I had ceased to believe in a supreme being, I had not believed in magic since I was a small child, and yet magic seemed to be the only

answer. Real sex changes only happened on an operating table, and yet I was certain that I had not been experimented upon by a mad surgeon. Even the most skilled doctor could not have caused me to lose the pounds and inches I had lost in becoming Joan. Even if such a technique did exist, it would not explain how I had lost several years. That just left magic.

But what person could have as much magical power as The Judge had used on me? None that I knew of, unless...

I recalled back in seminary a course I had taken on comparative religions. While Christian tradition lacks any meaningful tales of transformation (and even those few—except for Lot's wife—involve celestial beings), other mythologies were rife with such tales. Amerind, Hindu, and Graeco-Roman myths had any number of shape-changing stories, where unwitting humans were forced into the shape of animals or the opposite sex.

'Wouldn't it be ironic,' I thought, 'if our own Christian god didn't exist, but one of the "heathen" faiths proved to be real?' I couldn't help it: I giggled at the thought. Yet that was the only explanation I could come up with.

Then another thought struck me. The Judge had no apparent name—only a title. Judge... Judge... No, it didn't ring any bells. Then there was the police officer—Officer Mercer. That name was easier to deal with. Mercer shared the first four letters with Mercury.

But Mercury as I remembered looked nothing like Officer Mercer. Mercury wore a winged helmet and had wings on the back of his ankles—and he carried a... a... caduceus. Yes, that was what it was called. Officer Mercer on the other hand, wore sunglasses at night, wore a neatly-pressed police uniform, and carried nothing, unless the gun on his hip could be considered.

Still, the similarity in the name couldn't be coincidental. And as for The Judge—'Judge' and 'Jupiter' began with at least the first two letters. The Judge certainly was imperious enough to be the alleged King of the Gods.

It seemed strange that I could so easily dismiss the god I had been raised to revere and worship and believe so suddenly in a Roman deity who hadn't been worshiped in centuries. But of course the god of my father had never changed me into a young coed, either.

My thoughts were interrupted by a quick rap on my door. "Joanie, are you awake yet?" Sherrie's disturbingly cheerful voice called out.

I didn't really want her to see me in my dishevelled condition, but I needed to talk to her. Maybe she would know more about what happened to me. She hadn't acted as if I was anything other than her partying friend the night before, but she was the only person I knew other than... well... Mitch and Danny, and I certainly didn't want to see either of them right now.

"Just a minute!" I called out, leaping for a closet where I quickly located a white satin robe with pink roses printed all over it. I slipped it on hurriedly, a little disturbed that it was scarcely long enough to cover my bottom, I padded over on bare feet and opened the door.

If Sherrie felt anywhere near as badly as I did, she certainly didn't show it. She was wearing a white tank top and a short blue denim skirt, all neat and fresh. Her expression was unnaturally cheery, given the drinking we had been doing the night before. "Jeez, girl," she laughed, "you look like shit."

"I feel like it too," I groaned, rubbing my forehead to lessen the pain.

She took my hand, leading me to my closet. "A quick shower and a shopping trip will take care of that."

"I'm not up to shopping," I insisted, trying to pull away from her. I was beginning to feel queasy and wanted to sit down on the bed—or lie down if Sherrie would let me.

"What? Joan Sheppard doesn't want to shop? Where is the real Joan Sheppard and who are you?"

I almost wilted under the question until I realized she was just joking.

"I... I don't feel so good."

"Aw, let Sherrie take care of you," she said in mock sympathy.

Although an hour later, I found out she really meant it. She ushered me into the shower, insisting that I wash and condition my hair as well. I had no idea what to do, so I just tried to relax and found this new body could shower and shampoo on automatic. I almost wished it could run completely on automatic and I could just sleep forever in a distant corner of this girlish mind, but apparently the automatic functions didn't go nearly that far.

When I stumbled out of the shower, I felt much better. The stickiness between my legs was gone, the cobwebs in my brain were at least partially cleared away, and I felt like a new... woman.

And no, I didn't do anything untoward while in the shower. I just tried to ignore my new anatomy.

Before I knew it, I was dressed in an outfit similar to Sherrie's. She had picked it out for me while I was in the shower. I quickly dressed in the yellow tank top and white denim miniskirt, frankly anxious to cover my alien body as quickly as possible, even if it had to be in a revealing, sexy outfit that in my previous life I would have railed against.

By the time I had used the automatic function to do my hair and apply makeup, Sherrie had coffee brewed. Well, not exactly brewed—it was instant with water heated on a little hot plate on my desk, but at least the liquid was hot and bitter, and after a couple of cups of the stuff, I felt almost human again.

Almost.

"Let's get going," she urged as I belted down the last of the second cup, thankful that my new identity liked coffee almost as much as my old one had. "There's a sale this weekend at March's, and if we don't get there when they open, all the good stuff will be gone."

I grabbed my purse and followed her. I wasn't exactly in a mood to go shopping, but I couldn't sleep in all day either. Shopping was probably the better option. As bad as I felt, I wanted to find out what was going on, and I wasn't going to learn much sleeping in my dorm room.

Sherrie drove us downtown, and I was happy to see it wasn't too far from campus. It was certainly within walking distance. As I had suspected, Ovid wasn't a very big town. Since I didn't know if I owned a car or not, it was good to know that I would be able to walk wherever I needed to go.

We were nearly into the heart of the business district when I spotted City Hall. "Sherrie!" I yelled out, nearly causing her to swerve into the curb. "Sorry," I said when I saw her alarmed look. "I forgot something I needed to take care of here."

Sherrie pulled to the curb and looked at me, frowning. "You didn't get another ticket, did you? I thought your dad wasn't going to let you drive anymore after the last one."

I sighed. This Joan I had become was a real piece of work, it seemed. "No. It's not a ticket. Look, just let me out and I'll meet you at..."

"March's," she supplied with a grin. "Boy, you must be out of it today. I thought you could handle five beers better than that."

"Five? I thought it was three..."

"Honey, it was at least five—maybe more."

That made my head feel even worse. I waved as Sherrie drove off, then made my way over to City Hall. With any luck at all, I'd be able to see The Judge and get him to change me back into a man. I was certain that once I had a chance to explain that I was completely unfit for this life he had thrown me into, he'd find it in his heart to change me back. The longer I stayed in this female body, the less I liked it.

It was very quiet in the building, and I had seen few cars in the parking lot. I realized belatedly that it was Saturday. I only hoped the gods didn't take weekends off. The only activity came from a lighted office with a Police sign over the doorway. Hoping that the strange Officer Mercer did in fact, take weekends off, I cautiously peered inside.

The only person I saw was an attractive black woman—probably in her thirties—hunched over a computer terminal. She wore a uniform similar to Officer Mercer, and the nameplate on her desk identified her as an

Officer Hazleton. She looked up at me and smiled.

"Can I help you?"

"Uh... I'd like to see The Judge," I managed a little more timidly than I had planned.

"He won't be back until Tuesday," she told me. "He's out of town."

There was something in the way she said it that made me think "out of town" didn't just mean over to Oklahoma City for a long weekend.

"The best way to see him is make an appointment with his secretary on Monday," she continued. "Her name is Cindy Patton. You probably saw her in the courtroom yesterday—attractive blonde lady."

"So you know who I am..." I surmised.

"Word gets around," she admitted with a twinkle in her eye. "But take my advice, honey. Don't bother to see The Judge. He's not going to change you back, and if you make him angry enough, he could make things a whole lot worse for you."

I plopped down in the chair in front of her desk. "What could be worse than being a slutty little coed who drinks too much and has sex at the drop of a hat?"

Her visage became a little more serious. "Is that what you think you are?"

"Damned right!" I snapped, then groaned, "Now I'm even cursing. Before yesterday, I wouldn't have even said 'damn'."

"Well, if that's the worst you can say right now honey, you're doing better than most people."

"There are worse things than my language," I admitted, blushing. I felt like the Paris Hilton of Ovid, and Officer Hazleton seemed well aware of it.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

We were both silent for a minute, as if neither of us knew what to say

next. Then I ventured, “Can I ask you a couple of questions, Officer Hazleton?”

“Call me Wanda,” she said quickly, but more slowly, she added, “There are some things we can’t talk about, though.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Can’t,” she affirmed.

“Well, maybe you can at least tell me why The Judge did this to me and my friends,” I began.

She laughed, “You don’t start with the easy questions, do you? Most people start out wanting to who The Judge really is.”

“I’ve already got that figured out,” I replied casually.

“You do?”

“Sure, he’s Jup... Ju... Ju...” I thought my nervous system had suddenly gone tilt. All at once, I had no control over what I was trying to say. The word “Jupiter” formed in my head, but it refused to roll off my tongue.

“Save your energy,” Wanda suggested. “You can’t say it. That’s one of the things none of us can say. But I’m surprised you figured it out so quickly.”

“I was a minister. Most ministers take a course or two in Comparative Religions,” I explained, relieved to have control of my voice again.

“They’re easy and sort of fun—particularly the old dead religions that aren’t in competition with Christianity anymore.”

I stopped for a moment, wondering why if the gods of the ancient Mediterranean world did really exist, why mankind had stopped worshiping them. After all, it was much easier for ancient mankind to believe in a god who could transform him into something else than it was to believe in a god who rarely and inconclusively showed himself and limited himself to boring and rare transformations—like turning Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt. Not much star power there, if you asked me.

“I can tell you this much,” Wanda offered. “Just about everybody who isn’t a shade—that’s what we call the transparent people you’ve probably noticed—hereabouts is either one of them or like you and me. And most of them don’t remember they were ever anyone else.”

I remembered how my friends had reacted to their transformations. Apparently, none of them remembered his or her previous lives. But that would mean...

“It’s like murder,” I murmured.

“Certainly the death of personality,” Wanda agreed. “We don’t know for sure, but some of us think there’s some part of the original identity buried in the core of the new personality. But that may just be wishful thinking. I don’t think even the... ones who did this really know for sure either.”

“But why do they do it at all? Oh, I heard what you said—that no one knows for sure—but there must be some theories.”

“There are,” she confirmed. “Most of us believe Ovid was created out of thin air for the purpose of somehow avoiding a worldwide disaster. Why else would The Judge and his sort suddenly come back into play after so many years of being relegated to nothing more than myths?”

“But what sort of disaster?”

Wanda shrugged. “The best guess is some sort of World War Three scenario. Again, honey, no one knows for sure.”

I asked Wanda several more questions, but the answers were no more conclusive than the first ones. In summary, nobody seemed to know what was going on in Ovid. Oh sure, there were theories, but no firm answers. I was left with the impression that nearly everyone who was transformed and retained their original memories fought their new lives for a while before settling down and conforming to the new personality they had acquired.

But did that mean that in a few days or weeks, I would be the happy little slut that Sherrie and the guys thought me to be? Would I be a party girl, on the lookout for cold beer and hot sex? I vowed then and

there that that wouldn't happen to me. It wasn't just my religious background: it was also the fact that I couldn't see wasting my life doing things that I didn't like. I had never liked beer, and while I had to admit, it had tasted good yesterday, I didn't really need it. And as for sex... well, I was drunk, wasn't I? I didn't really remember what I had done, nor did I feel any great need to do it again.

I recognized though, that I wasn't necessarily safe from The Judge's mischief. It was very possible that my attraction to beer and men would be amplified by my new body. While I didn't find any need for either at the moment, my desires could change without warning, as they had last night. I might be forced to adapt to my new role, but I vowed to do my very best to avoid anything that involved excessive drinking and wanton sex.

As I walked down Main Street, I was very thankful that I had fought down the impulse to wear full-fledged heels and had instead opted for sandals with just a small wedge. Otherwise, I don't think I could have made it to March's. Ovid's largest (and presumably only) department store was nearly at the opposite end of the business district from City Hall. Now that was really only about a five-block walk, but it would have been almost impossible for me in heels. How did women walk around all day in heels? Grimly, I realized that was one question I might end up answering for myself.

Ovid's business district was unusually robust, I noted. Our ministry took us to many small towns which appeared to be the size of Ovid, but none of them looked nearly as prosperous as this mysterious place. Most towns Ovid's size depended upon agriculture to support the economy, but the small family farm was quickly becoming a thing of the past, reducing the population of hundreds of communities in Oklahoma and the surrounding states. And as roads improved, many small-town residents found it just as easy to drive an hour or two to a larger city to do their shopping, reducing the business districts of many little towns to a patchwork of empty, boarded-up stores and offices where retail shops once prospered.

Not so in Ovid. Every store was occupied, and judging from the

newness of the cars parked on the street and the clothing shoppers wore, Ovid was not your typical dying farm town.

The shoppers, by the way, were a combination of real people and the transparent ones Wanda had called shades. No one seemed to notice anything wrong though. I knew that some of the real shoppers had to have retained their memories, but I guessed that after a while, you tended to ignore any differences with the shades. Come to think of it, I had already started thinking of Sherrie as a real person, and as for Mitch... well, he had seemed real enough when it counted.

As I've said, the residents of Ovid, shade or not, appeared prosperous. Also, they were very attractive on the whole, almost as if they were the beautiful extras we see in movie street scenes. The women in particular were well-dressed, with skirts and heels well in evidence in spite of the fact that it was a weekend. And the men...

Well, they were well-dressed too, but what had suddenly brought me up short was the way I was beginning to notice the men in a way I had never noticed them before. It was as if my mind was analyzing the men the same way I had noticed women in my former life. As a man, I had often looked with appreciation at a woman, noting her long, silky hair, her smooth, well-toned legs, her large bouncing breasts. But now, I was noticing appropriately similar attributes on men—well-defined muscles, flat stomachs, hair I could imagine running my fingers through...

'Stop that!' I warned myself. I might be in the body of a young woman for now, but that didn't mean I had to start ogling men. Besides, The Judge had given me a hot little body that seemed to be naturally attracted to men. I didn't want to find myself in the same compromising position (or positions, to put it crassly) that I had found myself in the night before.

So for the remainder of my walk, I vowed to ignore the men who paraded past me. That wasn't as easy as it might seem, because they certainly weren't ignoring me. Some even spoke to me—politely for the most part—but I acted as if I hadn't heard them, much to their disappointment.

I tried to concentrate on my goal, which I could see just ahead: March's Department Store. It was only three stories tall, but it was, in both height and breadth, the largest building in the business district—typical for small towns years ago, I thought. Yes, typical then, but not now.

Mid-America (and most of the rest of the country, for that matter) had been invaded by *Wal-Mart* and other similar discount stores, driving the small, local department stores out of business. But in Ovid, March's seemed to prosper. A block ahead, I could see it was easily the most active store along Main Street, with consumers of all ages hustling out of the store with bright plastic March's shopping bags dangling from their hands.

I was so intent on watching March's—and not watching men—that I ran right into one. Maybe it was because I was not accustomed to walking in women's shoes, or maybe it was because the person I ran into was big and as solid as a rock, but before I knew it, I was sitting in the middle of the sidewalk, my newly-padded butt stinging.

"I'm terribly sorry," a male voice said with concern. I looked up and saw a large hand reaching down. Gratefully, and with more than a little embarrassment, I reached up to take his hand. I swear it felt as if it was twice the size of mine, but I suspected it wasn't any larger than my own hand had been before my transformation.

When I was back on my feet, I suddenly realized the man in front of me looked familiar. He was not much older than me, with dark hair and an olive complexion. Where had I seen him before? Wait, the courtroom... I gasped as I recognized him. "Aden?"

I regretted saying it the moment the name escaped my lips. Yes, I was sure he was the person my friend and associate had been turned into, but as I had already learned, the majority of Ovid's transformees had no recollection of their previous lives. That, I realized sadly, was very possibly my friend's fate. Still, I felt a moment of hope that my old friend had somehow made it through his own transformation with his memories intact.

“You know me?” he asked. “I mean, you know who I was?”

He remembered! But why didn't he remember me? Then I recalled that when we last saw each other, his own transformation was far more advanced than mine. He had no way of knowing who I had become. “It's me, Aden—Hans!”

“Hans?”

I blushed as he looked me over in disbelief. Only a day before, I had been as male as he was. Now, though, there I was, standing in front of him in sandals and a short skirt, my smiling lips coated in lipstick and my usually short hair flowing over my shoulders in waves. I should have been embarrassed, and I suppose I was, just a little. Still, I couldn't help smiling at seeing my good friend.

“So have you seen any of the others? Myron? Any of them?” I asked.

He nodded sadly. “I saw them all. None of them remembers a thing. Their ‘parents’ were waiting for them outside the courtroom. They all left with them. Not a single one of them looked as if they remembered a thing about their real lives.”

“That's what I figured,” I sighed sadly.

We were forming something of an obstruction on the street. Then I noticed there was a small coffee shop just across the street from March's. “Come on,” I said, nodding toward the coffee shop, “We need to compare notes.”

I was relieved to get off my feet, and a hot cup of coffee sounded awfully good. Aden ordered while I sat and rubbed my feet. Although my sandals didn't have an exceptionally high heel, they were high enough to change the way I walked, and I wasn't used to it yet. I'd have to stay off higher heels until I could wear relatively low ones without doing damage to my feet and legs.

“Here you go,” Aden said, handing me a steaming cup. He had lost all of his English accent, I noted. That was a shame. His old voice was deep and cultured. I had often marvelled at his speaking voice during our services, and wished for one as good. Not that his new voice

wasn't pleasant, but it had more of a flat Midwestern speech pattern now.

He sat down opposite me, and I couldn't help noticing how handsome he was. As much as it bothered me to be evaluating men with a feminine eye, I had no choice. What I saw before me was a good-looking guy about my age who stood about six two (thus towering over my new five and a half foot height. His dark, slightly curly hair and olive skin gave him the traditional Latin lover look, and I had to admit, it was pleasing to the eye. 'Control yourself girl,' I reminded myself.

Quietly, so as not to be overheard by the others, he told me his story since transformation. His new name was Mark Bisetti, so his new ancestry was Italian. Like me, he was a student at Capta. He was also an athlete, playing halfback on the Capta football team.

"I never even liked American football," he groused. "Now, I'm expected to play it."

"How do you manage?" I asked. I had never known Aden to follow American football at all, so I doubted if he even knew the rules. He confirmed that for me.

"It isn't easy," he told me, describing his afternoon practice the day before. "I just let my body do whatever it wanted to do," he continued. "Apparently, it wasn't enough. The coach was chewing on me all through practice—even made me run laps afterward. I spent the evening studying the playbook. I had no idea the game was so complicated. Thank God there's no game until next week."

"You could always quit the team," I suggested.

He shook his head. "No, apparently I'm on an athletic scholarship, so no football equals no school. I think it's for the best that I try to stay in school. If I'm going to be stuck here, I might as well make the best of it. I'll just have to learn the game. I was a pretty good midfielder at home, you know, so I'm sure I can pick this sport up with a little study."

"It's certainly a good thing you don't have a game today," I pointed out, sipping my coffee.

“That’s for sure,” he nodded. “We play Thursday evening. You’ll have to come to the game and see me.”

I flushed a little, realizing how normal that sounded. Here was the big, masculine football player urging the cute little coed to come watch his athletic prowess—maybe even as the prelude to a date. “I’ll try,” I sort of promised.

“Now tell me your story,” he prompted, his dark brown eyes looking into mine.

I shifted uncomfortably. “There’s not much to tell,” I lied. I wasn’t about to tell him what I had really done the night before. “I just woke up as a girl, met a few people, and went over to City Hall this morning hoping to find The Judge and get him to turn me—us I mean—back into who we were. Unfortunately, he wasn’t in.”

“No chance of that,” Aden—no, Mark told me. “I talked to a couple of guys last night—my teammates, it seems—and they told me it never happens. We’re who we’re going to be for the rest of our lives.”

“You’re sure?” I gasped, hearing my hopes dashed.

“They told me independently,” he remarked. “Apparently three people together can’t discuss any of this. And yes, I believe them. I don’t think they had any reason to lie. In fact, one of the guys said he heard about someone who gave The Judge too hard a time, so The Judge turned him into a little baby—a girl baby, no less.”

What was I going to do? I couldn’t stay this way. I didn’t want to be a girl. Maybe if I had become what Aden had been transformed into, I could have tolerated it. After all, I would have been spared the hypocrisy of my life and been given the opportunity to start my life anew as a young man.

“Why are you downtown?” Mark asked me casually.

I gasped. I had forgotten all about meeting Sherrie. It wasn’t that I wanted to shop with her, but she must have been wondering what had happened to me. “I’m supposed to meet someone,” I said, looking furtively over at March’s. “I forgot all about it.” I jumped to my feet.

Mark rose, too. “Hey, okay. Look, I’m in the athletic dorm—Booker Hall. Give me a call when you get settled in.”

“I will,” I called over my shoulder. “I promise.”

I felt a little better after talking with Mark. It was good to know that he had kept his memories, too. Of course, he had given me some bad news: according to him, there’d be no changing back into our old lives. Maybe he was wrong, though. I wasn’t about to take the word of a couple of jocks when it came to determining my own future. I still wanted to see The Judge and plead my case. Maybe I could at least get him to change me into a man like Mark. That I could tolerate.

I found Sherrie in the women’s department. She was pushing her way through a rack of brightly-colored and very short skirts. She had already pulled a couple of them and put them on top of the rack, presumably to try on. She looked up at me and smiled. “There you are! I wondered what happened to you. I was about ready to send out search parties.”

“I... uh... ran into to somebody... from school. We had a cup of coffee.”

Her eyes brightened. “A male somebody, I presume?”

“Uh... yeah—Mark Bisetti,” I stammered.

“Yeah, he’s on the football team. He’s cute!” she squealed with a wide grin. But then her expression got very serious. “But what’s Carl going to do if he sees you with Mark?”

Since I had no inkling of who this Carl was, I had no idea. So I bluffed. “Don’t worry about Carl.”

“I’m not worried about Carl, honey,” she replied seriously. “I’m worried about you.”

Oh-oh. Carl was starting to sound an awful lot like a boyfriend. That could be bad. No, bad wasn’t the word—disastrous was more like it.

“You weren’t worried about me last night,” I pointed out, pretending to rummage through the skirt rack—although I had no idea of my—Joan’s—

size or tastes.

“But that’s because Danny and Mitch are Delts,” she told me, as if that explained everything. When she saw the blank expression on my face, she put her hands on her hips and called, “Hell-o! You know, Delts? Nobody on the football team ever joins the Delts. Why do you think I let Danny line you up with Mitch?”

She shook her head and sighed. “I knew it was a mistake to set you up, but you just had to meet Mitch. I told you before I set things up that it would be a mistake, but no, you just had to have him. You and your ‘I hear he has a big prick.’ I suppose he did, too, huh?”

Sherrie was getting a little too loud for my tastes. I looked around nervously, hoping no one else was within earshot. “Quiet down!” I hissed, in spite of the fact that—to my relief—there was no one within hearing range.

Sherrie dramatically rolled her eyes back. “Like anybody who comes in here wouldn’t know you’ll screw anything with over five inches in his pants.”

“Sherrie!”

This time, I noticed one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen smirking from a couple of racks away where she was straightening up another rack. Great. Now the store clerk knew I was the campus—or maybe even the town—slut.

Sherrie squeezed my hand. “Oh, I’m sorry, Joanie.” Quietly, she added, “But sweetie, you’ve got to get control of yourself. You’re dating Carl now, and he won’t put up with your antics. You’re just lucky he was busy last night.”

“I’ll try,” I sighed, not adding that I wouldn’t be trying just for this Carl guy. I had no desire ever to get in the situation I had found myself in the previous night.

We had a quick lunch at a burger joint—some local place called *Rusty’s Burger Barn* out on the highway. Mostly, I stayed quiet, picking at my lunch while Sherrie enthusiastically described every

minute of the shopping trip before I had arrived. She was so excited I felt as if I was listening to a big sports fan discussing an important football game. Every skirt, dress and shoe she had touched was part of another big play. “And if you had been earlier, you would have gotten a free makeover just like me. See? Vera March herself did it.”

I had been so involved thinking about my own situation that I hadn’t noticed that Sherrie did look a little different now. Oh, she was attractive before, but now, her face seemed nearly flawless—too flawless. Maybe it was just makeup, and maybe the effect would wear off, but Sherrie seemed to be the recipient of more of the magic of the gods.

Let’s see... I thought, if this Vera March was a god—or rather goddess, who could she be? I couldn’t think of any goddess name Vera, but there was a Vesta. Although the beauty treatment didn’t fit Vesta. Then I realized that March might be Mars. That would make Vera March the presumed wife of Mars, or Venus.

What was going on? Why would ancient gods and goddesses be content posing as small town magistrates, policemen, and business people? It didn’t make any sense at all. Of course, the gods had been known (in myths at least) to be a bit capricious, pranking humans for their own sport. Yet I sensed there was something else going on in Ovid—something much larger in scope than simple pranks.

After lunch and a second run at shopping, Sherrie dropped me off at my room about four thirty. She had asked me to go out with her. She was going to see Danny again and was sure Mitch would be available, and since Carl was out of town all weekend... but I begged off. There were other things I needed to do, and there was no time like the present to get started on them. If I was to have any influence on The Judge, I reasoned, I needed to know just what was going on in Ovid. Then, I might be able to come up with some reason for him to change me back that would fit in with the gods’ plans.

Before I could start though, I saw the phone in my room was blinking. I was to discover later that I had a cell phone, but it was on the dresser and I had missed it earlier. On automatic, I punched in the PIN. The

single message was a further complication:

“Joan,” a man’s voice began. He sounded very uncomfortable. “This is your father. I wanted to tell you that I expect you in church tomorrow morning. Come to the eleven o’clock service and we’ll have dinner afterwards. I don’t want you blowing me off like you did last week. If you can’t get up early on at least one Sunday morning for church, maybe you should consider asking someone else for this semester’s tuition. Do I make myself clear?”

“I’ll see you at church.” As the message ended, I had a momentary flashback to my previous life. The voice claiming to be my father sounded very much like my real father. While I had respected my father, I can’t say that I truly loved him. Like his father, he was an unwavering fundamentalist preacher, convinced that every word of the Bible was literally true. He would brook no argument when it came to the Word of God, and he was convinced that his own interpretation was entirely correct.

In all honesty, I had bought into it for a while—all the way through seminary, in fact. I began to wonder if my ‘new’ father was very much like my real one. And the way he spoke on the phone and the phrases he used made me suspect that he was somehow associated with the church—a lay leader at best and a preacher at worst. Either way, there could be problems. I just couldn’t buy into all of that fundamentalist crap again. I wouldn’t buy into it, no matter what the consequences. I seriously considered blowing off the message entirely.

Then common sense stepped in. Things might not be as bad as I thought. It was becoming obvious to me that the girl I had become was not exactly a model citizen. Perhaps this new father had some reason to be annoyed. Maybe I (or at least the person I now appeared to be) owed it to him to at least hear him out.

But if he started spouting fundamentalist dogma to me, all bets would be off.

Pushing all of that to the back of my mind, I realized I was getting hungry. I hadn’t eaten much that morning—just a power bar I had found

in my purse and the coffee I had had with Mark and a burger I had only picked at with Sherrie. Strangely, I hadn't gotten terribly hungry—probably due to my smaller size—but I needed to eat something and soon. I found a dorm meal pass in my purse, so I wouldn't have to wander off campus.

To my surprise and delight, the dining room in the dorm offered very appetizing fare—an achievement that ranked up there with my transformation as a fantastic occurrence. I remembered my own undergraduate dining experiences, and often thought that prisoners in Third World jails probably ate as well.

In spite of the delectable smells from the serving line, my reduced appetite kept me from going too crazy. I settled for a small salad, some baked chicken, and some veggies. Well, I did manage to take a brownie as well. I had never been much of a chocolate fan before, but somehow I seemed to crave it now.

I was barely finished with my salad when a couple of well-dressed guys sat down at my table without waiting for an invitation. One was transparent. The other one was solid: he sat across from me slouched down at the table so he could get a better view of my breasts. “Hey Joanie babe, remember me?” he said with a Cheshire grin.

“Sorry,” I said, rather rudely. However, he did look a little familiar at that...

“I'm Chad,” he told me, as if it should mean something. When he saw it didn't, he continued, nonplussed, “Mitch introduced us last night at *Randy Andy's*.”

With a surge of embarrassment, I did remember—sort of. Mitch had introduced me to some guys, but I was already well oiled. Apparently, this Chad had been one of them. I looked at both of them. They were leering at me in a most unpleasant way.

“Mitch said you liked to party...” Chad went on.

Oh great, I thought, my reputation precedes me.

“Darrel here,” he gave a nod to his buddy, “has a place off campus. I

thought maybe the three of us could—you know—party tonight.”

“I’m busy,” I said brusquely, attacking the chicken with my knife and fork, all the while pretending it was this ass’s heart—if he had one.

Chad stiffened. “Look, babe, you don’t need to act like you’re too good for us. We know your rep. Now whattaya say?”

“She said ‘no’,” a voice said from behind me. The voice was feminine, but the tone was threatening. I turned to see a very attractive blonde with her arms folded over impressive breasts. She wore a white sleeveless knit top and a blue denim skirt, standard attire for a pretty, leggy blonde such as she, but this I realized, was not some chirpy little bimbo. No, this girl’s expression spoke of intelligence and determination. Her face carried authority far beyond her years. She was as solid as I, and I suspected that she remembered who she had been in her previous life, judging from the maturity of her gaze.

“Hey, who are you?” Chad challenged.

“She’s an RA, Chad,” the other one warned. The wary look in his eyes told me that Resident Advisors at Capta must wield a lot more power than they did where I went to school.

“Okay...” Chad said, sliding out of the chair as nonchalantly as he could. “Catch ya later, babe.”

Chad and his buddy scurried away as quickly as possible under the grimly smiling visage of my savior. Then, she turned to me. “May I join you?”

“Please. And thanks.”

She smiled again, only this time it was a warm, friendly smile. “No problem. I’m glad to help. I remember how it was when I first got here.” She stuck out her hand. “I’m Myra Smithwick, by the way.”

I took her hand. She shook hands like a man, I thought. Oh, I don’t mean she squeezed my hand until it hurt, but her handshake was firm—like a man’s.

“Uh... Joan... Joan Sheppard.”

The smile became a grin. "I know. It's tough to get used to a new name, isn't it?"

So I was right. "Yeah, it is." I looked around. Saturday night was obviously a slow night for eating at the dorm. No one was seated anywhere near us. "So you knew—or rather, know Joan?"

Her expression became one of sympathy. "Joan... you... have quite a reputation on campus."

"I can imagine."

"Finish up," she urged. "We'll go back to my room and talk."

While I finished, Myra explained that she was indeed, an RA. If not for her job, she would have lived in a sorority house, but being an RA paid for a significant chunk of her college costs. The only reason she was on campus that particular night was that the RA's took turns being available weekends, and this was hers. I considered myself very fortunate, because as Myra gave me a little of her history. As I had suspected just from her handshake, she had once been as male as I had been, so I could certainly see some parallels to my own situation.

What a difference a day made, I thought as we walked to her room. The night before, dazed and confused, I had gotten drunk gotten... well, I think 'laid' is the common term among college students. And if I was going to be one, I supposed I have to start talking like one. Anyhow, a day later, I had made two new friends in Mark and Myra—friends that I suspected I would be much better off hanging out with than Sherrie or Mitch.

Myra's room surprised me. She might have been male once, but there was nothing in her room to indicate that. Every item in the room suggested feminine tastes. Of course, so did my room, but Joan's tastes were not as refined as Myra's. I had also considering making my own room a bit more masculine—or at least neutral—so I was a little surprised that Myra hadn't done the same. I supposed like her, I'd get used to life in skirts and surround myself with feminine things. That seemed to be the pattern in Ovid from what little I had seen. I can't say I was excited at the prospect of becoming more feminine, but I

was starting to become more resigned to my eventual fate.

Once we were seated in the two reasonably comfortable chairs the room offered, she began. "I like to help a newcomer whenever I can. It seems to make the transition easier if you know some of what's going on. I know you have a million questions. Some of them I can answer—sort of—but some of them I can't, like who did this to us."

"I know who did this," I told her. "I figured it out pretty quickly. The Judge is Jup... Jup..." I silently cursed myself. I had had the same trouble with Wanda Hazleton earlier. When was I going to learn that I couldn't say The Judge's real name in that context?

"Don't bother trying to say it," she warned me as I tried to get control of my own voice. "You can't say his name—at least not in that context. But you're right. You figured it out quicker than most."

"I have a fair knowledge of ancient religions and myths," I replied as I had to Wanda, happy to have control of my voice again.

"Okay," she continued. "As for the why of all of this, your guess is as good as mine. No one knows for sure."

"But there must be some theories," I ventured.

"Lots of them!" she laughed. "Some people even think this is some sort of hell."

I shifted uncomfortably. "You don't think that, do you?"

"No!" she laughed. "But I suppose for some people, a new life in Ovid is a little on the hellish side."

I leaned forward. "But what do you think is going on?" I pressed.

She considered my question for a moment. At last, she said, "I think the... leaders of Ovid are hiding something—something they don't want anyone to know about until the time is right."

"But what?"

She thought about it for a moment before answering.

"Well, out at Vulman Industries, I've heard they're about to unveil an

engine that will run cars and planes without oil products—or at least with very little oil.”

That was a shock. It wasn’t something I would have expected to come out of a small town like Ovid—assuming she was right, of course. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Pretty sure. The rumors say it’s going through final tests now. Within a year or two, it will be formally announced to the world. As I say, though, that’s just rumor.”

That was remarkable if true. Such an invention would upset the economic balance of the world overnight. Western economies, dependent upon oil, would soar on the wings of cheap energy. But other parts of the world—the Middle East, Venezuela, even Russia—would flounder as their largest export became devalued before they could react. Even if it were true, it didn’t seem to explain why the gods had populated Ovid with transformed victims. I told Myra as much.

“You’re right, of course,” she conceded. “The engine could have been developed without Ovid, although probably not as secretly. Almost everyone I know thinks there must be another reason as well, but we haven’t been able to figure it out.”

Our conversation turned away from the mysteries of Ovid to more practical matters. I was relieved to find out that I would not be fertile for two or three months, so I didn’t have to worry about getting pregnant after Friday’s sexual escapade. Myra promised to help me when I began to have menstrual periods, so I wouldn’t have to figure everything out for myself.

She told me in detail about her previous life, and how she had come to accept life in Ovid and accept being a woman. That made me feel a little better, knowing that eventually, I’d be able to reconcile my male mind with my female body. That didn’t mean I was looking forward to being all girly, but having a male mind in a female body was getting to be a real pain. I was suddenly sympathetic with transsexuals—something I had never expected before Ovid.

She also told me the rules, such as no talking about the nature of Ovid

in groups of three or more. Apparently, The Judge and his pals didn't want people comparing notes in large numbers. She also told me that while she had already explained her background to me, many in Ovid didn't want to talk about their previous lives. But since she had told me about her former life, I felt compelled to do the same for her.

"You were a minister?" she chuckled. "Well, that works out well."

"What do you mean?"

She blinked. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"Well, you were a minister before, and now you're the daughter of a minister—Reverend Blakely Sheppard to be exact. He's minister—associate minister under Reverend Pickering, actually—at the First Baptist Church of Ovid."

I groaned. It was my worst-case scenario. I had been hoping my father was only a deacon or something. No wonder the voice of my 'father' had been so terse on the phone. I was the daughter of a minister and the campus slut, all rolled up into one very screwed-up package. I remembered growing up under my father's roof, and how difficult it had been to live as his son—and as his son, I had at least tried to please him, even going into the ministry myself. Now though, everything was turned upside down. I was a minister's daughter instead of his son, and apparently a wayward, willful daughter at that.

After I had explained this to Myra, she thought for a moment, then responded, "It may not be all that bad. Just make him happy—go to church, say the right things to him, and he'll probably leave you alone—and continue to fund your education. I would advise giving up the slut role, though. It usually leads to a bad end in Ovid."

"No problem there," I muttered. And it wouldn't be. I never wanted to be in the position I had found myself in the previous evening again. Then I added, "The problem might be the religious part. It was hard enough to fake belief in God before, but..."

"Fake belief?" Myra asked, as if she hadn't heard me the first time.

“You were a minister and you didn’t believe in God?”

“A long story for another day,” I demurred. “Let’s just say I have my reasons for losing faith.”

She nodded. “Fine. But I’ll leave you with one thought on religion. The g... that is, The Judge and his... ilk all attend church.”

“So?”

“So given who they are,” she explained, “doesn’t it seem a little funny that they find a need to go to church?”

I hadn’t thought of that, but she had a point. What were mythological gods doing attending church services? Was it just a cover to look normal—to look human? That was possible, but it was also possible that there was another reason: maybe they knew something we didn’t know. It was a disquieting thought for me.

Fortunately, the conversation turned to more mundane topics, and after awhile, both of us grew tired and said goodnight. I was very impressed with Myra and found myself thinking of her as an appropriate role model. From what she had told me, she had been given an identity in Ovid not much better than mine, and yet she had turned things around to become a successful student well on her way to a fulfilling career. She had high hopes of going on to law school, and it sounded as if her grades would get her there without any trouble.

Was that what I was supposed to do—turn Joan’s life around? As I climbed into bed, I realized it was either that or be a small-town party girl destined to have her life come down around her ears. I’d do it, I resolved, but that wasn’t all I would do. I was angry at The Judge for putting me in such a position to begin with, and I vowed as sleep claimed me that not only would I find a way to turn Joan’s life around—on my own terms, that is—but I’d find out just why The Judge and the other gods had done this in the first place.

From the trouble I had waking up for church on Sunday morning, I

suspected Joan was not, by her nature, an early riser. Allowing my body to automatically go through the morning routine of peeing, showering, and making myself presentable, I seemed to get a little more rest. It was almost like dreaming, albeit a bad dream. Going off automatic, I found that my makeup was a bit heavier than I would have liked I for church, but I decided to live with it, since I wasn't sure how good a job I could do on my own just yet.

I decided to select my outfit for church on my own, since I was afraid 'native mode' would have me in something more appropriate for *Randy Andy's*. It wasn't easy, though. Joan apparently hadn't thought to include an outfit appropriate for church in her wardrobe. All the skirts seemed tight and short, and the blouses were all revealing, displaying a significant acreage on my chest. I finally found a dress pushed to the back of the closet which was almost acceptable. It was a little short and form-fitting, hugging my new curves with a tan, silky material. At least it wasn't bright red with a plunging neckline.

I tried to remember how my wife had gotten ready for church, choosing the proper accessories and jewelry. The dress called for heels, but I thought I'd try to get away with flats. Then I found that my wardrobe included only heels or shoes way too casual for the outfit. With a sigh, I settled on a pair of brown-heeled sandals. They were 'only' two-inch heels. I say only because although I had worn heels my first night in Ovid, I had worn nothing that high or narrow. The problem was that all the other shoes that went with my dress were at least two and a half or three inches high. Even on automatic, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to handle anything quite that high. Also, I had consulted the town map in the back of the phone book and knew I had about a six-block walk—not a problem in sensible shoes. In higher heels, however...

I contemplated walking in tennis shoes while carrying my heels. I had just about decided to do that when there was a knock at my door. "Who is it?" I asked tentatively. I wasn't expecting anyone, and whoever it was might mean problems.

"It's Mark," a voice called back, to my immediate relief. "I wanted to

see if you were going to church this morning.”

How like Aden, I thought. I’m sure there was no question in his mind that I would want to go to church that morning, just as he did. While I had lost my faith, his had always been strong. I had always done my best to hide my true beliefs from him. How could he know that, left to my own devices, I would have used my transformation as an excuse never to set foot in a church again?

I opened the door for him. He was dressed casually but neatly. That was a departure from his usual well-tailored suits, but I could understand how his current attire was more in line with his current identity—just like my dress, I reasoned. “Yeah, I’m going. With your last name, though, are you...?”

“Catholic?” he laughed. “I suppose so. I haven’t really checked to see. I thought I’d go to First Baptist though. I’m sure it will be more familiar. How about you?”

“The same,” I replied. “Just let me gather up a few things...”

I finished my outfit, transferring everything to a matching purse, adding a necklace and a bracelet, and picking up my tennis shoes.

“Are you planning on working out during the service?” he asked with a grin.

“No, I just can’t walk that far in heels.”

He shrugged, “That’s okay. I’ve got a car.”

‘Lucky stiff,’ I thought. Not only did he stay male, but he had a car as well! I guessed The Judge just had it in for me.

As we drove to church in his aging Toyota, I explained to him I would be meeting with my new father after the service. He nodded, understanding. “From what I’ve heard of your reputation, that could be an uncomfortable meeting.”

“How right you are,” I sighed, wishing once again that my dress didn’t reveal quite so much of me.

The church was impressive—in a small town sort of way. The

congregation was equally impressive, I suppose. First, the sanctuary was, while not full, far more well-attended than I would have expected on a warm late summer morning. And the congregation brought back the idea of 'Sunday best,' since all the men wore ties (most wearing suit or sport coats as well) and all of the women were dressed in skirts and heels. Were it not for the current clothing styles, I could have easily assumed Ovid was in some sort of time warp where the sixties never died.

As I would have expected, the people in the congregation consisted of both shades and normal people. I wondered if the shades had souls, or if they were merely placeholders until someone like me wandered into Ovid. Come to think of it, I hadn't thought there was such a thing as the soul in a long, long time. I supposed when one was subjected to magic performed on them, it did bring the existence of a soul into question. After all, if there was magic in the world, why not souls?

Mark sat next to me at the service. It was as if he were on a busman's holiday as he nudged me every now and then during the service to point something out that struck his ministerial mind. On the whole though, he seemed to be favorably impressed.

In truth, the service itself was actually enjoyable. The minister, Reverend Pickering, was a powerful speaker, and his message was very New Testament—more about God's love than God's wrath. It was more like something I would have expected from one of the more liberal denominations, but it seemed to meet the approval of the congregation.

As an Associate Pastor, my 'father's' role was more limited—reading from the Bible and leading the congregation in prayers, but I was almost as impressed with his style as I was with Reverend Pickering. Unfortunately, I suspected the reverse wasn't true. I caught him focusing in on me with what looked to be obvious disapproval. I supposed it was to be expected. My dress was too revealing, and I was sitting with just about the only male in the sanctuary who wasn't wearing a tie. I suspected it was going to be a long day based upon his frowns cast in my direction.

“Well. I guess I’d better let you meet with your ‘father’,” Mark told me as soon as the service ended. I could sense that he wasn’t exactly anxious to meet ‘dad’ just then. I couldn’t exactly blame him: I wasn’t very anxious to meet him either.

“I suppose so,” I sighed, watching enviously as he drifted away into the crowd, leaving me alone in the narthex to suffer the disapproving stares of several of the parishioners. There was no sense in putting off the inevitable, I realized as I made my way over to my new father while the last of the morning’s crowd filed out.

“You look like a trollop,” he said under his breath, without any other preamble.

“Yes, nice to see you, too,” I muttered. This was not starting out well at all.

“If your mother were alive, she’d be scandalized by that outfit.”

Wonderful—worse yet. Dear ‘daddy’ was a single parent—judgmental, conservative, and abrupt. Come to think of it, though, he was very much like my real father had been, and I had managed to get along with him. I reminded myself that I didn’t want to annoy him too much. If he did as he threatened and cut off my school funds, I would be in worse shape than I was now. It wasn’t that I exactly wanted to be a college student, but college was a relatively safe place to hang out until I could either convince The Judge to give me back my old life, which was extremely unlikely, or until I adjusted to this new one.

“It’s the most conservative outfit in my closet,” I informed him evenly.

“Since you don’t approve, I’d be happy to get something a little less... revealing,” I ventured.

He blinked for just a moment, the stony look on his face softening just a little. “Do you mean that?”

“Sure.” I wasn’t just saying it to please him. I wasn’t too happy wearing a dress that exposed far more skin than it covered. Not only was it too revealing, but in the efficient air conditioning of the church, I was downright chilly.

“What happened to ‘I’ll dress any way I want to’?”

I shrugged. I realized I was acting a little out of character, but under the circumstances, that seemed the best approach. “I don’t know. Maybe that isn’t quite as important to me as I thought.”

“Or maybe you’re just starting to grow up at last,” he countered, but his tone was less grating. In fact, it was almost pleasant. “Give me just a minute and we’ll go to lunch.”

It was then as I was waiting for him that I spotted The Judge. He was escorting a woman who I recognized from a picture in the lobby of the dorm—the president of Capta College. The two of them were talking with a younger couple. The man looked very much like a younger version of The Judge, and the woman with him was the most beautiful woman I think I have ever seen. Come to think of it, she was the woman I had seen at March’s.

I assumed that the president of the college was one of the gods, although I had no idea which one. What was her name? I tried to visualize the picture I had seen of her. Her name was Elizabeth... Elizabeth... Vest. Suddenly, I realized that the goddess Vesta I had speculated about earlier was alive and well and president of Capta College.

As for the younger couple, a woman that beautiful certainly had to be Venus, and as I recalled my myths, she was married to Mars. Mars and Venus—the Marches, it would seem.

This was my opportunity to talk to The Judge, I thought suddenly. What an unexpected opportunity! I did my best to catch up with them, but just as I started after them, they turned and headed out of the church. By the time I got to the door and looked out, they were nowhere to be seen. They couldn’t have walked away that quickly I realized, but then I considered that gods probably didn’t need to actually walk from place to place.

I thought back about what Myra had said to me. Come to think of it, it had been a good question, if only rhetorical: what were Roman gods doing in a Baptist church in the first place? That prompted an obvious

question in my mind—a question more troubling than curious: if they went to church, what did they know about the Christian faith that I didn't know? Oh, I supposed they could be just attending church to fit in to the community, but as reclusive as The Judge appeared to normally be, his public attendance at church seemed a little out of character. Besides, did he really need to impress anyone by going to church?

“Are you ready to go?” my new father asked, breaking me out of my speculations.

“Oh! Sure.” Small talk was limited as we drove in his car—a black Ford sedan in keeping with expectations for his profession. There wasn't time for much talk. The restaurant he had chose was a little place called *The Greenhouse*. It was close to City Hall, so we were right downtown.

The hostess greeted us by name and showed us to a booth near the rear of the dining room, which was quickly filling up with the after-church crowd. Several people spoke to my new father—or at least waved at him as we walked past. He smiled and spoke back, giving me the impression that maybe he wasn't really as dour as my real father had been. The people he spoke to seemed genuinely to like him. I reminded myself that this was indeed, a small town, like the one where I had really grown up. Traditionally, everyone seemed to know everyone else. I suspected that everyone also knew everyone else's business as well.

After we had ordered, my new father leaned forward, his hands folded on the table in front of him, and began to get down to business.

“Joanie, I've been hearing some very disturbing things about you.” At least his tone was one of concern, rather than accusation.

“Oh?” What more was there for me to say? I had already determined that my new identity was a ‘bad girl’—sex, drinking, and who knew what else. I had even experienced some of myself, but I had a hunch this man who thought he was my father didn't even know about my escapade Friday night. He seemed to be referring to a long pattern of behavior that I could neither deny nor defend since I hadn't really been

there.

"If Elizabeth—your mother—were still here, maybe she could have talked some sense into you," he went on, ignoring my interjection. "She loved you very much. Maybe she would have understood you and been able to reason with you.

"Now I know I can't keep you from your grandmother's money. She left it to you to make sure you'd be able to get a good start in life—a good education. But the way you're starting out in college, I'd say it's a sure thing you're going to flunk out. If that happens, I want you to know I'll notify the trustees and see that you don't get any more of your grandmother's inheritance until you're thirty, in accordance with her will."

So that was the situation. In spite of his telephone threat to cut off my tuition, apparently I had an inheritance. I could use the inheritance for college but nothing else until I was thirty. If I was permanently stuck in Ovid, that would be all right—if it wasn't too late to keep Joan from flunking out of school. I had been a decent student in college—not a genius, certainly, but decent. I could pull her—me—out of the tailspin, so long as the previous Joan hadn't dug too deep a hole. It was early in the semester, so I suspected I had a good chance of turning things around. Of all the options available to me in this new life, going to college seemed to be the best for the moment. I would have to try to get Joan's life back on a positive course and keep her in school.

I tried to look as contrite as possible as I replied, "I know I've made some mistakes, and I'm sorry. I promise you I'll try harder—really I will."

He looked sceptical—not that I could blame him. "To what do you attribute this epiphany? This wouldn't have anything to do with that boy you were sitting with today, would it?"

"Boy? Oh, you mean Mark," I stammered. "No, Mark is just a friend."

"He looks foreign," he pressed.

"No... no," I assured him. "He's American. His name is Mark Bisetti."

"Oh—Italian. Catholic?"

Aden had been as Baptist as I was, but I realized there was a good chance that Mark was Catholic—or at least supposed to be Catholic.

“I’m not sure,” I hedged, sensing my new father’s disapproval.

Apparently he was one of those born-again types who disliked Catholics. I had known a number of them—including my real father. It didn’t matter much to me, though. I just considered Catholics as deluded as any other people who believed in a god.

“Well, you’d better not get interested in a Catholic,” he warned. “They always expect you to convert.” Then, unlike my real father, he sighed and added, “But I suppose it wouldn’t be the end of the world if you did convert.”

“I told you, he’s just a friend,” I reminded him.

He looked as if he was about to say something and then thought better of it. I guessed that he was going to make some comment about the quality and nature of my ‘friends.’ Fortunately, for both of us, he left the remark unsaid. If he had said it, I think I would have stormed out of the restaurant no matter what the consequences.

We ate pretty much in silence, the gap between us nearly as wide as it had begun when we first met. I couldn’t say that I entirely blamed him. The person I had become had obviously been the source of deep disappointment and anguish for him. He wasn’t perfect: in fact he was badly flawed with his prejudices and uncompromising attitudes, but I suspected Joan had helped to make him that way. To be fair, I was beginning to realize he wasn’t a bad person.

I had an opportunity I realized, to become the daughter he had always expected to have. After all, as the son of a similar man, I had managed to please my father by walking the straight and narrow to follow in his footsteps. However, I wasn’t willing to go quite that far as I had as a man. For one thing, I was certainly not going to become a minister. My lack of faith aside, there were few women Baptist ministers, some branches of the faith banning them entirely. But I would try to be a good student and keep myself out of trouble. I would be doing that more for me than for him, but it would still probably make him a little happier with me.

Strangely enough, I found myself wanting to please him. Compared to my real father, he wasn't such a bad guy.

After lunch, he dropped me off back at my dorm with one last warning. "Remember what I said," he cautioned as I got out of the car with a curt but not unfriendly good-bye. "If you flunk out, you're completely on your own."

"I won't flunk out," I assured him. His only reply was a curt nod as he drove away.

Mentally exhausted, I shuffled back to the dorm, hoping to get a little privacy where I could study and try to get Joan's academic career back on track.

Unfortunately, it was not to be.

Carl 'Colossus' Rhodes, as I soon found his full name and nickname to be, was a junior and the starting center for the Capta College football team. To my chagrin, he was also my boyfriend—or at least so he and everyone else on campus thought. My first meeting with him was just outside my dorm room. He was leaning against the wall next to my door, his arms folded, bunching up his letterman's jacket. The jacket looked far too warm for the heat of late summer, but as I was soon to learn, Carl made a point of being seen with his possessions.

I was also soon to learn that he considered me one of those possessions.

"So where were you?" he growled, his brow furrowed causing the short blond hair on his head to slip forward. I couldn't help but notice there seemed to be little or no neck beneath that head.

Although I didn't know him on sight, enough people had warned me about Carl that I was pretty sure who he was. While he thought of me as his girlfriend, I was pretty sure I wanted nothing to do with this lummoX. However, I also knew that I couldn't come right out and say that. Through the years, I had known several men like Carl—possessive, threatening, and quick to violence. Fortunately, I had always been a man before. Most men like Carl were only a threat to

their women—or any man who showed the slightest interest in their women. I would have to be careful, since I was one of those women now.

“I was having lunch with my father,” I told him, trying to keep my voice steady and show no fear. In truth, I was frightened half to death. Even as a man, I would not have had much of a chance to hold off someone like Carl if he were really angry. But at least as a man, I could have sown seeds of doubt—perhaps I was stronger and a better fighter than I appeared to be. Men like Carl never took unnecessary risks proving their manhood.

But now I was a young woman—his woman, or so he thought. As a young woman, he could snap me like a twig.

“Your father?” He frowned again. “You and your father don’t get along.”

Oh-oh. He suspected something. Did he think I had been cheating on him? Unfortunately, he was right, but I couldn’t exactly explain to him that I was new to this body and managed in my disorientation to get drunk and have sex with another man. Carl was a shade, so there was no chance of him understanding such an excuse. At least I hadn’t been lying about my new father. I could confidently defend myself.

“He called me up yesterday,” I told him truthfully. “The message is still on my phone if you want to hear it.” I hoped he didn’t. What if there was a new message from Mitch? Or what if Sherrie had called me to warn me about Carl? He already suspected something. A message from anyone but my father would probably not help my case.

“He really called you?” At least a little of the disbelief had left his voice, but not all. I only hoped his suspicions were typical male-centered paranoia and not the result of someone blabbing to him about my Friday night at *Randy Andy’s*.

“Yeah. He was afraid I was flunking out. I told him I wouldn’t. So I’ve really got to study...”

I tried to squeeze past him, opening the door, but he caught my arm.

Although I don't think he was really trying to hurt me, I suspected I'd have a bruise there tomorrow.

"Wait a minute. Aren't you going to welcome me back like you always do?"

Oh lord! What was he talking about? I had no doubt Joan and Carl were sexually active—with each other, I mean. I needed to fit in—to make everyone believe I was really Joan, but I wasn't going that far. Friday had been an accident, and I certainly had no desire to repeat it—especially stone-cold sober.

I had already been worrying about what might happen. I wasn't ready to get pregnant. Myra had said I had a grace period of two or three months before I could get pregnant, but I was still concerned. There was no written warranty regarding that. What if The Judge had made an exception in my case, and had made me fertile from the start? Just to be sure, I had located Joan's birth control pills. I had popped one that morning, but how did I know Joan did so as regularly as required? I didn't want to chance it, although to be honest, I didn't want to have sex even if I were completely sure I wouldn't get pregnant. Even if I had wanted sex, I was sure I didn't want it with Carl.

"Well?" he pressed, his eyes drifting toward my bed.

"Please... Carl," I begged "I really have to study..."

He pushed me into the room, and I could see from the lust in his eyes that no amount of begging was going to help. I grimaced, realizing that I was about to be raped. Oh, Carl wouldn't consider it rape. As far as he knew, I was just his compliant little girlfriend, ready to take him on whenever he felt like it. Was Joan really this much of a pushover? I thought. He didn't even seem very upset. Maybe this denial was some sort of sick rape fantasy Joan and Carl played with each other.

In seconds, I'd be on the bed. There seemed to be no escape, but then...

"Am I interrupting anything?" a girl's voice called out. The tone indicated she knew very well that she was and just didn't care. I

practically cried out in happiness as I saw Myra standing in the open doorway. Thank god Carl hadn't thought to lock the door.

"Uh..." was Carl's less-than-intelligent reply as his hand quickly jumped away from his zipper.

"You do know the rules, don't you, Mr. Rhodes?" Myra asked sweetly. "The rules about leaving the door to a girl's room open when you're visiting her?" she clarified.

"Carl was just leaving," I piped up. "Weren't you, Carl?"

Carl shot me a killing look, but as I had expected drawing from memories of my own college days, he recognized that it wouldn't be a good idea to disobey an RA. The nasty look evaporating from his face, he lowered his eyes and rushed out of the room, avoiding Myra's stare.

"Thank you very much!" I sighed as soon as he was gone and Myra had closed the door. I plopped down on the bed, sitting with my head in my hands. "He was going to... to..."

"I get the idea," Myra smiled grimly. She sat down beside me and put a comforting arm around my shoulders. "It seems The Judge has given you a particularly nasty challenge—or challenges," she mused.

"Challenge?"

"I have a theory," she told me. "You see, I had an asshole boyfriend when I got here, too. It seems as if everyone who comes here ends up with some particular personal problem to solve. That's why I—and a lot of others—believe The Judge sets these situations up to test us. It's as if he and his pals want to see how strong we are before we really fit into the community."

"Then he must want me to be especially strong," I groaned. "He gave me a demanding, religious father, a psycho boyfriend, and a reputation as a campus slut all to overcome. I don't even like boys."

"That part will take care of itself," Myra laughed.

"What? Liking boys? I don't think so."

"It's true," she insisted. "Before you know it, you'll be attracted to boys. There don't seem to be any gays in Ovid."

"So The Judge is homophobic?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. After all, remember his background. I think it's just part of their effort to make Ovid 'normal' in a fifties sort of way."

"Return to family values," I suggested. When she looked at me a little oddly, I explained, "Do you remember the old TV shows like they show on Nick at Night? That's what a lot of my religious brethren would have us return to—no drugs, no open homosexuality, since to them, it's a disease, everybody dressing better..."

She nodded. "I see what you mean. That pretty much describes Ovid. Change the clothes and the cars and it's 1960 out there."

"But why?" I asked. "The sixties were a simpler time, sure, but there were problems then as well."

"Problems like Carl?"

I had gotten so wrapped up in speculating about the nature of Ovid that I nearly forgot about Carl. "What am I going to do about him?"

"Just remember he can't get too out of hand," Myra advised. "The Judge won't put up with anything too violent. My guess is that if Carl tried to harm you, Officer Mercer would miraculously show up just in time to stop him."

"Even if I dumped Carl?"

"Absolutely."

That was the first good news I had heard today, I thought. But if Myra was right, I might still end up with a boyfriend. That was certainly not good news. While I had to admit, I was starting to notice boys' looks a little, that didn't mean I was ready to start dating them—or worse. I supposed I would just have to let my urges take their course, just as long as those urges didn't leave me with my legs spread.

After Myra left, I settled in to study. Fortunately, while I had been a

reasonably good student in college, I had had to work at it though. As a result, it didn't take me long to get back into the swing of things. Fortunately, Joan was a freshman, so her—my—coursework was still pretty general. Had I been changed into, say, a senior taking advanced biology classes or some other subject I knew little about, I would have had a real problem. It was also early in the semester, so I would have time to attend most of the lectures and pick up what I needed to take the tests.

The only subject I had a little trouble following was chemistry. It had been a long time since I had cracked a science book of any sort, and I had a rough time understanding a fair amount of the material. With any luck, I would have a decent lab partner who could explain the details to me.

I was pretty tired after an evening of studying. I only took one small break to eat dinner: then it was back to the books until bedtime. I also reviewed a copy of my class schedule and studied a campus map, so I figured I was all set for Monday morning.

When I got up the next morning, I actually felt pretty good. The initial surprise of waking up with breasts moving around or long hair in my face seemed almost normal to me. It was amazing how quickly one could adapt to a new body, but I supposed there was some magic help involved as well. I still hadn't mastered the arts of makeup or clothing selection though, so I went on automatic to get ready for classes. I almost stopped myself though, when I saw the outfit my body had picked.

Looking in the mirror, I contemplated changing clothes. The tiny denim skirt and the revealing green knit top seemed almost too much for me. Whatever happened to girls wearing jeans and sweatshirts to class as they had when I was younger? But when I walked to my first class, I saw that a number of girls were dressed just about like me. Oh, there were jeans and sweatshirts too, but there were a lot more skirts than I expected.

A number of students greeted me along the way. Of course, I didn't really know any of them, but I was supposed to. I'd just return their cheery greetings with a quick "hi" and a sparkling smile and rush on, as if I was running late. It didn't take me long to figure out that as a reasonably pretty girl, that was enough for most people.

To my delight, Mark was in my first period chemistry class. He sat next to me and we talked but couldn't say much since others were in earshot.

I leaned over to him. "Are you any good at chemistry?" I asked softly.

"I always had high marks in chemistry," he replied proudly as the class settled in for the lecture.

Bingo! I was definitely going to need help in chemistry, and I had been wondering how I was going to get someone to help me. Of course, I hadn't known anyone else in the class, so asking someone to help me was problematic at best.

"Can you help me with it?"

He grinned. "Sure." And we made arrangements to meet that evening after dinner to study together. I was relieved. Since Mark knew who I was, he wouldn't try to put the moves on me as one of the other male students in the class might have done. And since my class was heavily male, I would have undoubtedly ended up with a male tutor.

The bad news of the day was that Carl was in my English class. He came in and slouched down next to my seat. "We need to talk at lunch," he informed me in an ominous tone. It wasn't a request, either. It was obvious from the way he delivered the message that he fully expected me to obey. I shuddered, just thinking of what the relationship between Carl and my previously shade self must have been.

I had hoped to see The Judge at lunchtime. I didn't have another class until two, so I would have been able to walk to City Hall and back, but not if I was stuck with Carl. I had to beg off, no matter what the consequences.

“I can’t,” I told him. “I have to... go to court.”

It was just a little lie, but the look in his eyes was cautious. “You... have to see The Judge?”

Was he the only magistrate in town? I asked myself. Then I realized yes, he probably was. Going to court in Ovid didn’t just mean losing a few points off your driver’s license. It could be a literally life-altering experience. “Uh... yes.”

The frown on Carl’s face was unsettling. While Carl was not a shade, I had thought that he was probably one of those people who had been transformed but not remembered his previous life. It was possible, though, that I was wrong. The mere mention of The Judge had had an effect on him: there was a little fear in that frown. Or maybe he didn’t remember, but maybe everyone in Ovid had learned that whatever the reason, The Judge was not an individual to cross.

“What for?” he finally worked up the courage to ask.

“Mr. Rhodes?” the instructor called from the front of the classroom. “If you would kindly save your personal matters until later, I’m sure the class would appreciate it.”

“Uh... sorry.” He slumped back down into his seat, and I no longer felt his hot breath at my ear.

Well, that took care of Carl for that day. I’d make it a plan to rush out of class immediately, not even looking back toward him as I left. He most certainly would have no desire to tag along as I saw The Judge: that much was very clear. But I knew I wouldn’t be able to avoid him forever. Maybe if I could get The Judge to see reason and let me and my people out of Ovid, I wouldn’t have to worry about Carl anymore. Unfortunately, I already knew that would be a long shot. Still, I had to try.

To my chagrin, I learned that women’s shoes aren’t always made for walking. I had had the foresight to wear flats that morning, figuring I would need to do some walking, but by the time I reached City Hall, my feet were hurting. I just hoped I got to sit long enough to rest them

before I had to walk back.

The attractive blonde woman I had seen in the courtroom was sitting at a computer terminal outside The Judge's office. She looked up as I approached and asked, "Can I help you?"

"Uh... I'd like to see The Judge."

She smiled, as if she wasn't surprised. I supposed a lot of The Judge's victims asked to see him as soon as possible after their transformations. I was afraid it meant she was used to screening out disgruntled new residents, and I braced myself for a curt dismissal. To my surprise, though, she replied, "Let me see if he's available."

She rose and opened the door to The Judge's chambers and said something I couldn't quite hear. When she was finished, she turned back to me and smiled again. "The Judge will see you now."

My heart jumped. As much as I wanted to see him, I had expected to be turned away. Now what would I say? I had rehearsed my arguments while walking over, but I also didn't want to anger The Judge. What he had done to me was bad enough, but if I said the wrong things to him, I suspected he was capable of doing far worse things to me.

While he was still an imposing figure, The Judge looked somewhat less intimidating sitting behind his large oak desk wearing a business suit instead of his robes. Maybe I just thought so because his countenance was less stern: there was even a small smile on his lips. "Well, Ms. Sheppard, please sit down. How are you fitting in to your new life?"

"All right, I guess," I admitted, taking the offer of a seat, careful to keep my short skirt in place. I could see him nod in approval of my feminine action.

"It does take some time," he admitted. "Some adapt better than others, it would seem."

"Can I ask why you made me like this?" I asked, motioning to my own body.

“I think the reasons will be apparent to you before long,” he replied cryptically.

Sensing he would say no more on that, I asked him, “Is there anything I can say or do that will convince you to change me and my people back?”

I wasn’t surprised when he shook his head. “For most of your people, it would make no difference. Only you and your associate Aden, retained your original memories. I’m afraid all of your other friends would not remember their previous lives, even if I were to change them back.”

I was afraid of that. “Then you effectively killed them.”

“Not really,” he countered, leaning forward with his hands folded. “You see, they were already effectively dead. The train...”

“I know. You said the train would have hit us. Still, this way, we’ll be missed. You could use your magic to restore us to our old lives and make it as if the train had never touched us—or at least you could do that with Aden and me. What you’ve done instead is almost like murder.”

“Personality death?” he asked, amused.

“Well, yes. I suppose that’s what it is. Why save us just to take our lives away?”

“I really don’t owe you an explanation, but I think I’ll give you one. It might ease your mind and help you to fit in better here. By agreement, I can only populate Ovid with those whose own lives are due to be lost, and even then, only if their very existence can be erased without any lasting damage to the future. There are a few exceptions—engineers and scientists who work at Vulman who have no idea of the true nature of Ovid, but those are rare. As for those individuals, they are given substitute memories if they leave Ovid.”

“Wait a minute,” I broke in. “You’re saying our lives were meaningless, so you’ve erased them entirely? Do you mean no one even knows we existed?”

“That’s correct. But there are positive aspects to that as well. Your wife, for example...”

“What about my wife?”

“She’s still alive in the new reality that occurred after you ceased to exist,” he explained cheerfully. “She married someone else, of course. They have three lovely children. I thought, Ms. Sheppard, that you’d be happy with that news, but it seems to have saddened you.”

“Not really,” I murmured, but in fact, he was right. I cursed myself for my selfishness. If I were still in my old life and someone had offered me a way to bring my wife back, I would have taken it at once. Now, though, to find out that the price for her reanimation was my own death—no not death—rather my removal from existence, I was torn. Did The Judge really have such power—the power to restructure reality? It seemed a power well beyond anything I had read in myths and legends.

“So why build Ovid in the first place?” I asked on an impulse. “Why change reality at all? Surely you’re not doing this just for amusement... are you?”

The Judge smiled. “Thank you for that observation. I’m afraid many of our residents do think we are doing this strictly for our own amusement. As you’ve correctly deduced, there is another reason for Ovid to exist, but one which must remain secret for now.”

“So in summary, we’re all stuck here and we can’t know why,” I sighed.

“Exactly! I knew you were quick.”

I realized he was poking fun at my expense. I had practically hobbled myself walking to City Hall to attempt to reason with him, but he had told me nothing and had apparently found the entire incident amusing. I vowed to myself that I would get the best of him yet, no matter what the risk. I would continue to change my—or rather Joan’s—life for the better, so he’d get no more laughs out of my predicament. But also, I’d find out what he was up to. I didn’t like secrets, especially when they

affected my life and the lives of those around me.

“And now, Ms. Sheppard, if there are no further questions, I do have some work to do.”

“Deciding whose lives to erase tomorrow?” I asked caustically.

Instead of becoming angry, he favored me with another smile.

“Exactly. I knew you’d understand. Please give my regards to your father when you see him.”

And without another word, he returned his attention to a thin pile of papers on his desk. With a disgusted sigh, I rose to leave his office.

I was so angry as I left The Judge’s office that I didn’t even notice the pain in my feet. Oh, The Judge and I had parted pleasantly enough—on the surface. After, I sighed and got up, he had wished me well and I had politely thanked him for his time, but under the surface I was seething from his patronizing manner. In the end, I vowed to myself that I would make him sorry he ever condemned me to this new life. Somehow, there had to be a way.

I was able to lose myself in classes, and after classes, I threw myself into my homework at the campus library. At least I had gotten a little satisfaction out of the afternoon, as my professors and fellow students seemed almost taken aback at the fact that the campus slut had done her homework and done it well. The library was much the same, with several students quietly surprised to see me diligently working on my assignments.

I toiled away until my stomach told me it was time for dinner. As I left the library, I realized I had been at my studies longer than I had realized. The sun was very low in the sky, and there were just a few cars in the faculty parking lots. I was actually a little concerned about being out on campus so late all by myself. I had quickly come to realize that attractive girls walking alone could land themselves in unwanted situations very easily. I was a little relieved when I reached my dorm.

“You might want to wait before going to dinner,” a voice called out to

me in the lobby. I turned to see it was Mark.

“Why?”

Mark got out of the chair where he had been sitting and said more quietly, “Carl just went into the dining room. He’s been asking everyone he sees if they’ve seen you.”

“Crap!” I muttered, realizing it was a word I never would have used before. Apparently, a little bit of Joan was rubbing off on my speech patterns as well. But who could blame me? What did I have to do to get rid of that muscle-bound idiot? At least he hadn’t thought to look for me at the library. I had a hunch the old Joan barely knew where it was. I looked at my watch. “If he just went in, he’ll be there until the dinner line is closed.”

“We were going to get together later to go over chemistry. Why not go off campus for dinner? We could always go grab a pizza,” Mark suggested. “Now that I’m of Italian descent, I seem to have become something of a connoisseur of them. Then we can study afterwards.”

“You’re on!”

Mark took me to *Tony’s Real Italian Pizzeria*, a little eatery off Main Street. I didn’t have any idea how good the food was, but the atmosphere was certainly right—checkered tablecloths and candles in Chianti bottles all over the dining room. Recorded Italian melodies were piped through the overhead speakers. The lighting was dim and the crowd small, but I supposed Sunday nights weren’t as busy as the rest of the weekend. We were led back to a secluded booth in a back corner where we were afforded some privacy. The nearest occupied table was some distance away, so when the waiter wasn’t present, we’d be able to talk freely.

I let Mark do the ordering. Since he seemed to embrace his new Italian heritage, I figured he’d be the expert on Italian food. Plus, as he had admitted to me on the way over, he had eaten at Tony’s the night before. “I always liked Italian food, but now I can’t get enough of it,” he admitted. “It’s like the compulsion came with this body.”

It's a good thing he had his eyes on the menu, because if he'd been looking at me, he would have noticed an alarmed expression on my face. Was it possible that in addition to the unconscious, automatic behavior our bodies experienced, that there were actual compulsions we had to endure as well? If compulsions came with our new bodies, I had a bad feeling what mine might be. Compulsive sex and drinking were the last things I needed.

"What would you like on your pizza?" he asked me.

"Anything is fine," I mumbled, too worried about potential compulsive behavior to worry about anything as mundane as what toppings went on our pizza. In fact, my appetite was now shot.

After Mark ordered for us, he asked, "So how did things go with your new father?"

"Not too bad," I replied cautiously, calming down inside at last. Then I told him what my new father and I had discussed at lunch and what I planned to do to stay in school.

"So that's why you wanted help in chemistry," he surmised as the waiter dropped off our drinks.

I took a sip of the Coke. "Yeah, I never was very good at chemistry. It was my weakest subject in college."

"It was my strongest," he countered, surprising me. When he noted my surprised expression, he explained, "Yeah, I was a science geek in school. I almost majored in it, but it interfered with my religious beliefs. Too many scientists believe in evolution."

I nodded. I knew what he meant. Given the fundamental nature of our religion, we tended towards creationism. I say "we" because in my former existence, I would have espoused creationism because it was expected of me. Actually, I had come to the personal conclusion that the evolutionists were probably right. It's hard to be a creationist when you don't believe in a god.

"The funny thing is, I seem to be a chemistry major now," he chuckled.

“Are you going to change your major then?” I asked.

He shook his head, looking away from my eyes. “I don’t think so. I’m sorry if this offends you, but Ovid has sort of shaken my beliefs a little more than I might have expected.”

This was an admission I would have never expected from Mark.

“Shaken them how?”

He leaned forward so he could speak more privately. “Until Ovid, I never imagined that the... that creatures like The Judge were real. Our religion says they aren’t, but here they are. I hate to admit it, but maybe there are other things that are wrong, too—things like evolution.”

His eyes pleaded with me for affirmation. I didn’t want to crush his faith completely. Although I no longer believed, it was not a philosophy that I was interested in publicly recommending. Instead, I answered carefully, “Ovid certainly puts a new spin on some of our cherished beliefs.”

A thin smile appeared. “Exactly! So you see, I’ve decided maybe I should be a bit more open to some scientific theories. Don’t get me wrong: I still believe in God, but maybe some of the scientific theories aren’t as much in conflict as we always thought. Maybe there’s a place for evolution in God’s plan.”

“Maybe,” I conceded, anxious to change the topic. “Have you wondered what The Judge and his pals are up to?”

“Sure,” Mark said. “I’ve talked to several people about it. No one really knows the whole story. All I’ve been able to pick up so far is that this Vulman Industries here in town has developed some sort of efficient motor that might reduce our dependence on oil. That appears to be part of the plan. Maybe this is sort of like Alamogordo.”

“Alamogordo?”

“Yeah, you know—where the atomic bomb was produced. The whole town was a big secret in World War II. All of the scientists and engineers working there had phony Albuquerque addresses for their

mail. No one even knew the town was there, except higher-ups in the government and, of course, the people who worked there.”

Our discussion was delayed by the delivery of our pizza. It smelled wonderful, and when I tasted the first bite, I smiled at Mark in approval. My appetite had returned in spite of my concerns about compulsions.

“Uh-oh,” Mark murmured, looking up suddenly when we were about halfway through dinner. I looked around to see what he was referring to and nearly peed in my pants (a real potential problem for a girl, I was starting to realize). What we saw were three hulking young men each wearing a letter jacket from Capta. At first, I thought one of them was Carl, but was relieved to see it wasn’t. I mentioned that to Mark.

“It might just as well be Carl,” Mark said grimly as the three were seated in a booth out of our sight. But there was no doubt that they had seen us together. “As soon as they see Carl, they’ll tell him I was with you. He’s not going to be very happy since you’re his girlfriend.”

“I’m nobody’s girlfriend,” I growled, causing Mark to shift uncomfortably.

“That’s not what he thinks,” he reminded me.

He was right. I had a sudden vision of Carl confronting the two of us, then punching Mark out and then turning on me to... to... Half a dozen potential fates Carl might inflict on me came into my mind, and none of them were pleasant. Sure, The Judge and the other gods would come to my rescue: I don’t think they’d tolerate any mayhem in their town. But Carl might not know that, and I hated to think of what he might do to me before they stopped him. I was, I admitted to myself, absolutely terrified of Carl. “What are we going to do?” I asked, fighting down a tremble in my voice.

“Well, I don’t think he’ll buy the ‘just friends’ excuse,” Mark said wryly. Then his eyes widened a little. “But since he won’t buy that excuse,” he reasoned, “let’s give him something he will buy.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’ve decided to be my girlfriend.”

I gasped, “Are you crazy? He’ll mop the campus with both of us.”

“Trust me,” he urged. “Finished?” He nodded at my half-eaten slice of pizza. Chalk it up to a smaller girl’s stomach, or maybe just to fear of being mauled by a jealous ‘boyfriend,’ but once again, I was suddenly no longer hungry. “Then come with me,” he urged.

After Mark had left cash for our meal, he helped me out of my seat and suddenly grasped my small hand in his larger one. “What are you doing?” I asked, nearly in panic as he guided me over to the booth where the jocks were sitting. My legs were actually trembling. In the short skirt that I was wearing, I hoped nobody notice them.

Mark didn’t answer, and when I looked up in his eyes, for some reason, the trembling went away. He just looked so confident, and there was even a small smile on his lips.

The three guys looked up from their beers as we approached. All three of them looked as if they had just seen a UFO, mouths open and eyes wide. If Mark had thought to shock them, he seemed to have succeeded admirably.

“Hey, guys,” Mark called out nonchalantly.

“Hey, Mark,” the three mumbled in response, almost as if they had been caught themselves. They had stopped eating, drinking, talking, and for all I knew, maybe even breathing.

Mark’s hand released mine, but it suddenly snaked around my waist. Before I knew it, he was pulling me closer to him. In the strangest way, I felt better—safer, if you will. He chatted with the guys for a couple of minutes. I wasn’t really listening to what he was saying, but whatever it was, his tone was normal, as if there was absolutely nothing wrong. He was rewarded with nervous replies, but he seemed to ignore the tension. I almost felt sorry for the three jocks. I think in the back of their minds, they were concerned that Carl would see them as complicit in Mark’s usurpation of his girl.

“Well, see you guys tomorrow,” Mark said cheerily. Then, turning to

me, he favored me with an attentive smile and asked, "You ready to go, babe?"

I mutely nodded my head. Not only was I ready to go: I was ready to run as fast as I could out of town—out of the state, if possible.

"Then let's go." Before he pulled his arm away from my waist, he brought me even closer, shocking me by planting a very hot kiss on my lips. I could feel the slight stubble on his face as he pushed forward, sticking his tongue in my mouth. I was kissing a man! Yuck!

Okay, sure, I had already had sex with a man, but I scarcely remembered the experience since I was both dazed by my transformation and as drunk as I could possibly be and still stay semi-conscious. But Mark's kiss... I was as alert as I had ever been and completely disgusted by the experience. What was he thinking anyway?

When he broke our embrace, I caught an embarrassed glance at the three guys in the booth. Then, I realized what Mark was doing. He wanted those guys to think that not only was he now my boyfriend, but that we enjoyed a very... intimate relationship. Was he suicidal? Carl wouldn't just hurt him: he would kill him. No, Carl would kill both of us!

"You're insane!" I practically screamed at Mark when we were back in his car.

"It's the only thing we could do," he insisted as he pulled out of the parking spot.

"And what are we going to do when Carl finds out?" I pressed angrily. "From the way you were mauling me in there, they'll think we just left to go scr... uh... make... uh..."

"Make love?" Mark asked casually.

I didn't exactly answered. I think I made sort of a gurgling sound.

"Joan, don't worry. Carl won't hurt you," Mark told me. Then he amended, "At least he won't hurt you if you're with me. I don't think The Judge would stand for it."

“I hate to disabuse you of that notion,” I shot back, “but Carl could do a lot of damage before any of The Judge’s people showed up to stop it—assuming he even wanted to stop it. I don’t think I’m exactly on the Judge’s Christmas gift list. What makes you think I’m protected?”

“Just a hunch,” Mark admitted, not making me feel any better. “I don’t think he put you into this situation just to have you knocked around by a jealous boyfriend. Besides, I’m not going to let him hurt you. To do so, he’d have to go through me.”

“Are you crazy?” I asked. “You may be Mark the football jock now, but inside, you’re Aden the man of God. Carl will break every bone in your body.”

“We’ll see,” Mark said confidently.

And see we did.

The next morning, I got ready for classes very reluctantly. I thought about not going at all, but I knew it wouldn’t do any good. If I didn’t show up on campus, Carl would just storm back to my room. At least on campus there would be witnesses to anything he did. Back in my room, he could murder me and no one else would know. In spite of what Mark seemed to think, I was pretty sure Carl’s rage would not be something The Judge would abate in time to save either of us.

I dressed as un-sexily as possible, hoping I wouldn’t look good enough for Carl to want. Unfortunately, this new body of mine wouldn’t have been un-sexy no matter what I did. I opted for jeans and a Capta sweatshirt, but my breasts still teased under the sweatshirt and the jeans were so tight that they appeared to be painted on. I wore no makeup, but to my chagrin, I had a face that didn’t need a lot of makeup. Okay, I wasn’t exactly stunning when I was ready for classes, but I would still turn many heads.

I peered in both directions outside my dorm room door, half-expecting Carl and his cohort to be waiting for me. To my relief, the hall was empty. But as I stepped outside my door, I heard a voice call, “Ready

to go?”

It was Mark, but I nearly jumped out of my skin anyway. “What are you doing here?”

“Walking you to class,” he explained calmly.

According to my class schedule, I had Western Civ that morning. Was Mark in my class? If so, how did he know my schedule? “You’re in my class?”

He shrugged. “I doubt it. I’m cutting classes today. Just think of me as your bodyguard.”

My eyes narrowed. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were looking for Carl.”

“Might as well get this over with,” he said calmly.

As we walked together, I began to realize that while Aden had been transformed into Mark, Mark was not exactly Aden. The differences were subtle, but they were there. Mark was more confident and more commanding than Aden had been. Oh, I don’t mean Aden was a retiring follower: he wasn’t that at all. But Aden would never have done what Mark was doing now.

That change made me start wondering—had I changed, too? Obviously, my change in sex was more drastic than what had happened to Aden. Although Mark was presumably stronger and more of a jock than Aden, he was still a man. He could act essentially the same way. I, on the other hand, had to play the part of a girl. The question was how much of my behavior was acting out a part and how much of it was a new me?

This would be my third full day being a girl, I realized, and although it was still strange, it was becoming less strange every hour.

Unconsciously, I walked and talked like a girl now—even when I wasn’t on automatic. I was beginning to see myself through others’ eyes, and I was beginning to act accordingly. Of course, that didn’t mean I was ready to start dating men, but the idea didn’t seem quite as repugnant as it would have been even the day before.

Take Mark's kiss, for example. He had surprised me when he kissed me, and I found it... well, disgusting—at the time. In retrospect, though, I realized after he left me last evening that it hadn't really been so bad after all. And snuggling up against his body had been almost... natural, if not entirely pleasant. What would I be like in a few days or a few weeks? Would I be mentally Joan Sheppard as well as physically?

For that matter, although I thought I was both unready and unwilling to start dating men, what would others call my dinner with Mark the previous evening? I had considered it just a meeting between two friends to discuss their respective predicaments, but wasn't it, in some ways at least, a date?

I tried to put my musings in the back of my mind and concentrate on class. No, Mark wasn't in my class, but he hung around outside in the hall. A couple of jocks were in my class, but they scrupulously avoided any direct contact with me, even avoiding eye contact when I glanced in their direction. Something was definitely coming down, I thought uncomfortably to myself. The other jocks didn't want to even admit they knew me for fear of risking Carl's wrath.

In spite of the tension, I managed to lose myself in the professor's lecture. Professor Lowry was a very good lecturer, and I was certain that even the jocks would manage to settle in and listen to her—or at least watch her. She looked more like a movie star than a college history professor, and the way she moved around the front of the room as she spoke had to have the attention of every male in the room. When she would pause for a moment to flick a long, blonde lock behind her ear, the guys would almost audibly sigh. I wondered who she had been before Ovid. Probably a crusty old male college professor. She knew her subject so well that she must have been a history professor before. And since The Judge seemed to enjoy changing people's sex, I assumed she must have been a man. I wondered if she even remembered her previous life.

I found the lecture particularly interesting, since it dealt with the history of the Middle East. It took me back to my own college days, where I often lost myself in the documented history of the time when Jesus

walked the Earth.

Although I had no belief in God anymore, I certainly believed there had been a Jesus. As for his being the son of God, well... that was another matter. In any case, he was an impressive historical figure who had more influence on the later world than all of the so-called important men of his time.

“Professor Lowry,” one of the girls at the front of the room asked as the lecturer paused.

“Yes, Michelle?”

“You said the peoples of the ancient Middle East were tribal. Aren’t they still tribal? Isn’t that part of the problem today?”

“It certainly is,” she agreed. “If it wasn’t for oil revenues, their tribalism in many parts of the Middle East would preclude any modern statehood in the region. If their oil were to run out—or no longer be of any use—their economies would collapse and millions would probably die—all because their tribal instincts would keep them from working together.”

“Is that what’s going to happen when Vulman’s new motor is introduced?” one of the boys asked.

She smiled. “I know there have been rumors about an engine being developed at Vulman that requires little or no oil, but no one is saying anything certain.”

Many in the class smiled at that remark—including the professor. It seemed the new engine was a secret outside of Ovid, but common knowledge within the community. To use Mark’s Alamogordo example, I suppose most of the people there had a pretty good idea what was being developed there too.

“Hypothetically, though,” the professor went on, “you’re right. If such an engine existed, economies throughout the Middle East would collapse. The end result would be catastrophic for the region.”

She seemed prepared to talk more, but the bell rang suddenly, bringing me back to the realization that Carl just might be waiting for

me outside the classroom door.

Although he wasn't waiting for me, Mark was, so the waiting for Carl's reaction continued. At least we didn't have to wait too long for the inevitable confrontation. I had an hour break after the first class, and Mark escorted me to the Student Union for a cup of coffee. Apparently Joan often went for coffee after that class and all her friends knew it, because Carl was waiting for me just outside the Student Union.

When I had been a man, I was never much of a fighter. I had no brothers, so I never grew up learning to defend myself against a sibling. In high school and college, I avoided fighting. I was always too small to be considered a jock but too big to be thought of as a wimp, so as long as I watched out for myself, I managed to avoid fighting almost entirely.

Now, though, as a girl, I suppose I was a good target for a bully, and there was no doubt that Carl was exactly that. In his mind, I belonged to him, and the look he gave Mark and me left no doubt that he intended to reclaim his property and make sure I never walked out on him again.

"Bisetti, you and me—we've got a problem," he growled.

"Leave it alone, Carl," Mark warned. "She doesn't want you."

"Maybe she should speak for herself," Carl suggested, with an intimidating look at me. The bastard actually thought I'd get scared and agree with him. Okay, I was scared—really, really scared—but I wasn't about to let him intimidate me.

"Carl, Mark's right," I managed to say, trying to keep the fear out of my voice. I was actually starting to tremble, and I think if I hadn't felt Mark's hand lightly touching my back in support, I might have made a run for it. Not that I would have gotten very far.

"Well, I don't see it that way," Carl said with chilling calm. He turned to Mark. "What makes you think you're man enough to take her from me?"

"Carl, we're teammates," Mark reminded him with equal calm.

“Not for long,” Carl returned, taking a step forward. “When I get finished with you, you won’t be in any condition to play football. In fact, you’re going to find walking to be a problem, little man.”

A small crowd had gathered around us, sensing there was going to be a fight very soon. They weren’t likely to be disappointed, I thought. It was then that I noticed a newcomer to the proceedings, standing back away from the gathering throng where he wouldn’t be noticed by either Mark or Carl. It was Officer Mercer, impassively watching. I half-expected him to stop the fight before it even started, but to my dismay, he seemed content to watch. I suppose if the events had gotten life-threatening, he might have stepped in, but what happened next happened so quickly, it wasn’t necessary.

There’s no doubt that Carl threw the first punch. No one was surprised about that. Given that he was larger than Mark and had a longer reach, the fight should have been over with just that one devastating punch. It didn’t happen like that though, and that did surprise the crowd.

Mark ducked to one side, allowing the punch to sail on past. Carl had been so confident that he hadn’t bothered to defend himself. He was wide open and completely defenseless when Mark’s own punch came from underneath, literally lifting Carl off the ground as it connected with his jaw. Carl went down like a dead tree in a windstorm, his head thankfully connecting with the earth of a flowerbed rather than the concrete sidewalk: otherwise, he might have been more seriously injured. As it was, he wasn’t going to be getting up all that soon.

“Come on,” Mark told me, taking my hand and pulling me away from the scene as a couple of Carl’s friends knelt down to revive him. “How did you do that?” I asked as Mark carried our coffees to our table.

“I boxed in college,” he explained. “I was quite good, actually. I had offers to go professional, but then I found God. It’s funny, but in this body, I have even more strength than I did back in college. If I had known how powerful I really was now, I would have let up on Carl a little.” He looked a little sheepish. “I’m not sure, but I think I broke his jaw.”

With Carl out of the picture for the time at least, I was free to re-invent myself and get my college career on track. I would also be able to pursue my other goal—that of finding out exactly what was going on in Ovid. With Mark pretending to be my boyfriend, I could fend off any guys who came sniffing around. I was free!

But as we sat there drinking our coffee, I realized I didn't really want to be completely free of Mark. As Aden, he and I had been professional associates, and I suppose we had become casual friends as well, although I never got to know him terribly well. As Mark though, it seemed as if he were an entirely different person, as I probably was as well. I felt... an attraction to him.

No, no, I don't mean like that. Sure, I was becoming more of a girl with every passing day, and there was no doubt that Mark was a good catch for any girl—any girl except me, that was. Sexually, I was doing my best to suppress any new impulses. My unfortunate experience my first night as a girl convinced me that no matter how girly I became, boys would not be on the menu.

But that being said, I did like Mark as a friend. I found I wanted to spend more time with him if I could. Sure, he would be tutoring me in chemistry, but I wanted his help and support on my other goal as well—finding out what Ovid was all about.

"Mark," I began slowly, "I've been thinking about your Alamogordo comment last night..."

"Alamogordo? Oh, right," he replied. "I remember."

"Are you curious, then, about exactly what's going on in Ovid?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, sure." I couldn't get over how different he was acting. With each passing day, he was becoming more and more like the good-natured jock he had been changed into. But of course, I knew I was acting more like a girl, too, so he was probably as intrigued with my behavior as I was with his. "A couple of guys on the team have been here a long time. They've talked to me about it a little."

“Would they talk to me about it?” I asked, almost disgusted with myself for sounding so natural as I wheedled him into cooperating by sounding like a woman in distress.

“I suppose,” he allowed. “You know the rules, though. Only two people can talk about the... situation here in Ovid at any given time.”

“No, I didn’t know that,” I mused. “I wonder why.”

“According to Dave Madison—he’s one of the guys I’m talking about—there was practically an uprising a few years ago when he was in high school. He was a college football player who lost a few years but grew up to become one again.”

“So not much of a change for him, eh?”

“Mostly age,” Mark agreed. “But I guess he was a black guy when he played for Northwest Missouri State. He’s white now, though. Meet me for lunch and I’ll introduce you.”

The Judge really seemed to have quite a sense of humor. Before he had come to Ovid, Dave Madison was a big beefy lineman for the Northwest Missouri State Bearcats. Now, he was a slender white guy with a shock of straw-blond hair and at five-ten, not exactly a stereotypical football player—unless he was a kicker. And that’s exactly what he was.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said, shaking my hand gently, although with his thick, farm boy Oklahoma twang courtesy of his transformation, it came out more “pleezed ta meetcha.”

“I’ll let you two talk,” Mark announced, picking up his empty cafeteria tray and adding, “I’ll see you tonight for our tutoring session, Joan.”

When he was gone, Dave said, “He’s a good guy, your friend Mark. He’s a lot better than the shade he replaced. The old Mark hung around with guys like Carl too much.”

“So Carl’s not that popular with the team?” I asked, surprised. I had assumed that Mark would be on the outs now that he had confronted the starting center. Not so, it would seem.

“Nah,” Dave grinned. “I don’t know if The Judge made him that way or if he’s just one nasty bastard. Even when he was a shade, he was that way. I always hoped somebody decent would get changed into him—somebody like your pal who became Mark. No such luck, though. Of course, the poor schmuck probably didn’t have much of a choice. People who lose their memories usually turn out pretty much like the shades they replaced. I never could see what Joan—the shade Joan I mean—saw in the bastard.”

I shifted uncomfortably. Given Carl’s size and the previous Joan’s sexual tastes, I had a pretty good idea what she saw in him. Carl might be a bastard, but if his equipment was proportional to his body size, the shade Joan must have loved to be bedded by him.

“So Mark tells me you want to learn more about Ovid—sorta figure out what all’s going on here.”

I nodded. “That’s about right.”

Dave certainly had a charming grin. He favored me with it once again. “Well, a lot of smart folks have come to Ovid, and they’ve been trying to figure that out for a lot of years.”

“But no luck, huh?” I was obviously disappointed. I had hoped Mark’s friend would be able to explain to me everything that was going on in Ovid, but apparently that was too much to hope for.

“Well, maybe some luck,” he hedged, sensing my disappointment. “I can probably give you some information you would take a few weeks getting for yourself. As for whether or not it will help you get all or even some of the answers, that’s up to you.”

It turned out that Dave wasn’t exactly the curious type on the surface, but he had lived in Ovid long enough that he had learned plenty of facts about the strange community. He told me in more detail the story of the engine Vulman Industries had developed—one that only used oil products as a lubricant, yet produced enough energy to fuel a vehicle for practically nothing.

Then he went on to tell me about Ovid’s unusual computer network

which seemed to allow The Judge and the other gods to see the future. Apparently, once upon a time it had been housed in a Radio Shack franchise until the security there got compromised.

“So that’s how they know who’s supposed to die,” I commented.

“They’ve got a computer tied into their magic so they can tell when somebody passing close by is about to die.”

Dave nodded. “Yeah. Then they save all those people and make ’em live here in Ovid. Some of us—the lucky ones, I suppose—remember who they were, but most don’t. Nobody seems to know why, but it appears that anybody who can see the shades as transparent people has a better chance of remembering their previous life than those who can’t. There’s even a rumor that The Judge can influence who remembers and who doesn’t, but nobody’s real sure about that.”

“And apparently, they can change reality, so the people we were never seem to have existed,” I prompted.

“That pretty much the way it is,” he agreed. “I know I tried once to get hold of my parents—my original parents, that is. It’s hard to call out of Ovid without permission, but it can be done. Anyhow, my real parents had never heard of me. Can you imagine that? It was as if I had never been born.”

Dave seemed a little wistful about that, but I found myself actually grateful that I had never existed outside Ovid. It was an odd feeling, and one I hadn’t really anticipated, but the more I thought about it, my past life had been nothing to brag about. I had lost my family and blindly continued along a hypocritical path preordained by my father and grandfather. Now, all of that was gone. My wife was alive once more, her untimely death wiped out along with my existence. My unborn child had apparently been born with someone else as the father. And I had never existed to make my livelihood shouting the praises of a god I had not believed in for years. For all her faults, Joan was at least cleansed from those burdens. It gave me an odd sense of freedom.

“There’s another thing that some folks claim to have seen on that

computer network,” Dave added. “Apparently, there’s a big war coming.”

“A war?” It seemed there was always a war coming somewhere. But Dave had said a “big” war. “You mean... a nuclear war?”

He nodded grimly. “Yeah. It starts somewhere in the Middle East. The rumor is that it takes down most of the world, and The Judge and his folks haven’t been able to figure out a way to stop it. Some people think that’s what Ovid is all about—you know, a haven from the war, so that there are some people left to rebuild.”

“Is that what you think, too?”

He shrugged. “It’s possible, I guess, but I think there’s more to it than that. If that was their plan, why not just wait until the war is about to start and block off some little isolated town as a place to start over? It doesn’t make sense to create an entirely new town out of nowhere.”

I silently agreed with him. The gods wouldn’t build an entirely new town unless they felt there was no other way to accomplish their plans—whatever those plans might be.

“So, Dave, is there some sort of underground movement here in Ovid? Is that why you know all of this?”

He managed a slight smile. “I wouldn’t call it an underground—we’re just a bunch of curious people. We can’t exactly have meetings in the college auditorium about this, though, so we just pass information back and forth as we hear it. Besides, I’ve told you just about all I know, and when you think about it, that’s not much. We’ve all been trying to figure out the real purpose of Ovid ever since we got here, but it’s not exactly something you can do by researching it in the library.”

As much as I hated to admit it, he was probably right. I had learned about as much as I was probably going to learn from others like me. To learn more, I would either have to get the information from one of the gods—a most unlikely proposition—or figure out how to get into their mysterious computer network. Either way, it wasn’t something I could

do until an opportunity presented itself. In the meantime, I'd have to live my new life as best I could and be on the lookout for any opportunity.

Dave and I parted with an agreement to get in touch if either of us heard anything new. I suppose that made me an active member in what passed for an underground in Ovid. Now, it was time to turn my efforts to living my new life as best I could.

The next phase of my life began that night when Mark and I met for my chemistry tutoring session. We had decided to meet in the library, and on the way over to meet him, I realized that my 'breakup' with Carl had produced a whole new set of problems. To be more precise, nearly every guy on campus must have feared Carl and what he might do to them if Carl caught them putting the moves on me. While Mark had beaten Carl in a testosterone-driven battle for my hand, Mark lacked the fearsome reputation Carl had built. Besides, Mark hadn't exactly taken me as his prize after the fight. So as I was soon to find out, some of the more daring (or if you will, stupid) guys saw me as being fair game.

"Hey, Joanie!"

I started in alarm. It was dusk, and the large shade trees that formed a canopy over the sidewalk I had taken to reach the library had made things darker and a little foreboding. I relaxed just a little as I realized the guy calling my name was only Mitch. He had called out to me just a short distance behind, and I hadn't heard him coming. Before I realized what was happening and could protest, he was walking next to me, an unwelcome arm slipped around my waist.

"Hi, Mitch," I replied noncommittally, trying unsuccessfully to shake off his arm. Thankfully, I had worn a very tight pair of jeans, so his effort to slip his hand into the top of my pants failed clumsily. "Sorry to run, but I'm on my way to the library," I added, hoping he would get the message.

"Yeah, me too," he grinned, obviously not taking the hint. "Hey, I heard you and the big guy broke up."

I just sort of grunted in response. I didn't want to say anything to him he might take as encouragement. I had already made one big mistake with Mitch—a mistake that I wouldn't repeat—and I thought the best response was no response at all. Unfortunately, Mitch didn't see things that way.

"That means you're all free then," he deduced. "So how about you and me, let's..."

"Let's not," I broke in, pulling his arm away with disgust. Obviously, he wasn't getting the message, so it was time to spell things out to him. "Mitch, I don't want to do anything with you except say good-bye."

"Hey, don't be that way, babe. You know you liked it the other night."

I wished right then that I were more of a physical person, for I would have liked to have slammed a fist into his bragging mouth, shattering teeth all the way. As it was, I realized all I might do is make him mad enough to decide to hurt me. And to think, I realized, this was what girls went through all the time. We weren't big enough and strong enough to send the message home to guys like Mitch, and so we had to be careful or we might find ourselves in deep trouble.

Then it came to me—the solution to my problem. "Uh, Mitch, remember Mark, the guy who took out Carl a little while ago?"

I could see from the look on his face that he had heard all about it. I was pretty sure nearly everyone on campus knew about Mark flattening Carl. I could also see from the worried look on his face that he wasn't so dumb after all—he had figured out what the fight had been all about.

"That's right," I confirmed for him. "I'm going out with Mark now. And Mitch," I added solicitously as I gently touched his arm, "I'm afraid Mark can get sort of... you know—jealous? And unlike, Carl, he's... well, kind of quick to take action, if you know what I mean."

"Uh... yeah." Again, his expression told me all I needed to know. He even looked around furtively to make sure no one saw my hand on his arm. "Hey, uh... Joanie, I just remembered... I left a book I needed

back in the dorm. I'll see you later..." Although his tone told me he had no intention of seeing me later. As if to punctuate that, he rushed away so quickly anyone spotting us would think I had the plague.

At least now I knew what I needed to do to keep the boys from hanging around.

"You want me to do what?" Mark asked. "You want me to be your boyfriend?"

We were studying in a private study room, so no one could hear us. I had proposed a 'dating' arrangement to him as we settled down to study.

"Not really my boyfriend," I clarified. "I'm not interested in... that. It's just that if everybody thinks I'm available, I'll be lucky to get across campus without a handful of lewd propositions." I didn't think it necessary to add that Joan's reputation would ensure that the vast majority of the propositions would be extremely lewd. "Look, you don't have to really take me places on dates or anything—just walk with me on campus, have lunch with me—that sort of thing. People will get the message."

I was having a difficult time understanding why he seemed so reluctant to do this for me. It wouldn't hurt his reputation to be seen with a cute girl. Still, he seemed wary. Then I was struck with a disturbing thought. "Uh... Mark, when you were Aden, I thought you liked girls. The Judge didn't do anything to you to change that, did he?"

"Of course not!" He turned red in embarrassment. It was kind of cute to watch a big, strong guy like him turn so red.

"Then you'll do it?" I pressed.

"I suppose," he agreed, but still more reluctantly than I would have thought.

What was his problem anyway?

So for the next few weeks, everything settled into a manageable pattern. My professors begrudgingly acknowledged that I had suddenly changed from a ditzy little slut to a serious student. My rising exam grades underscored the change. Of course, a couple of them didn't seem all that incredulous. Professor Lowry seemed to take my scholastic epiphany in stride, and although she never said anything to me, I was pretty sure that she was one of the transformed who remembered a previous life, so it was probably no surprise to her that someone like me could turn things around so quickly.

I didn't really learn anything new about Ovid, or the plans of the gods. That disappointed me a little, since I had learned so much in the first few days. But apparently that's the way things worked in Ovid, as Dave told me. Everybody who kept their memories learned what I had learned in the first few days, but the hidden motives of the gods seemed unknowable. I guess that was why just about everyone settled into their new lives, since they weren't going to learn anything that might change them.

Besides, even if I had wanted to learn more, I didn't exactly have time. The previous Joan had dug a pretty deep hole for herself in just a short time, and getting her grade point back to acceptable took a lot of time. At least my new father had gotten off my back. A few examples of my tests and papers with mostly A's were enough to mollify him. Now, the only thing he rode me about was to make sure I attended church regularly. It was a pain, but I managed.

Not just my grades were changing, either. I had a new set of friends. I found myself hanging out more and more with Myra and some of her sorority sisters. People like Sherrie who lived to party, quickly became bored with the new me. Oh, they'd still ask me to go to *Randy Andy's* with them on the weekends, but they were no longer surprised when I politely declined. Of course, Mark was a part of that as well. I'm sure they thought he and I were shacked up all weekend long, and I did nothing to disabuse them of that notion.

Oh yes, Mark...

Playing a couple was turning out to be harder for both of us than I

think either of us would have imagined. What I had not counted on was the fact that although in my mind, I was still male, my body was very determined to be female. This was punctuated just before Thanksgiving break when I experienced (or rather, suffered) my first period. I suppose as periods go, it wasn't any worse than what the average woman experiences, but for me, it was an unpleasant experience.

"You should go on the pill now," Myra advised after she had shown me how to insert a tampon.

"I... I don't plan on having sex," I stammered as I lowered my skirt.

"Still, it will help regulate your cycle and lessen the discomfort of your periods," she informed me. Then, she favored me with a mischievous grin. "And besides, if you change your mind about having sex, it's good for a little peace of mind."

I had gotten past my initial embarrassment when women talked about sex in front of me. I had been a little surprised to find out that most women could be almost as earthy as their male counterparts when the subject came up. The major difference was that a girl who was a virgin seemed to be more respected for it than a boy would have been by his peers. Of course, I got none of that sort of respect, since everyone on campus must have known that I was hardly a virgin, but at least I seemed to get some respect for becoming more discrete.

I had never told Myra—or anyone else for that matter—but I knew in spite of my denials, I would eventually need sex. Sure, I was hardly able to pass myself off as a virgin, and even since I had taken over Joan's life, I had experienced sex with a guy (although I had been too drunk to remember a lot of the experience). The problem was purely and simply, that my hormones were calling out to me.

If it had been just a matter of seeing guys in class or on TV and speculating idly as to what it would be like to have sex with them, I might have been able to keep a lid on my growing desires. Unfortunately, to keep guys off my trail, Mark was still posing as my boyfriend, and that required us to be in close physical proximity.

I wasn't completely oblivious: I knew Mark, too, was feeling the sexual pressure. Like me, he had been given back his youth, with all the sexual need that entailed. There I was, a very attractive girl holding his hand, walking sidled up against him, and even sharing a gentle public kiss every now and then, all designed to make others think we were an item. He wouldn't have been normal if all these things hadn't affected him, and more than once, I noticed in passing that the crotch of his pants was tented out quite a bit.

What had shocked me though, was that on those occasions, I found my own body betraying me as well. Sure, there was nothing to tent out in my pants, but I did find my own crotch becoming warm and damp, and my nipples seemed to tingle, pushing out against the material of my bra. I was most certainly becoming attracted to boys in general and Mark in particular.

Then came Thanksgiving.

Daddy (yes, I had started calling my new father that; it's funny how in Ovid, one seems to fall into a predetermined role) had 'reminded' me of a long-standing tradition to make Thanksgiving dinner together and share it with as many people as we could fit around our dining table. That turned out to be about ten more people, and each of us could invite five.

Of course, I invited Mark and Myra—and Myra's mother—but that was all I could think of to ask. Oh sure, I had made other friends at Capta, and I had even become acquainted with a few older friends from high school, but the older friends didn't really seem to fit into my new life, and my newer ones were, well, newer. We hadn't developed that close personal relationship that comes with shared ideals and experiences.

Daddy seemed a little conflicted when I told him I was only inviting three. "What's wrong?" I asked him as we sat together for after-church dinner a couple of weeks before Thanksgiving.

"Well," he said slowly, "I suppose I should be happy. You haven't invited some of the..."

“Losers?” I supplied, knowing that the Joan of the past had invited a few friends who walked on the wild side.

“Well, yes,” he admitted, a little surprised that I saw some of them that way, too. “I’m just concerned about this Mark. You and he seem to be awfully close...”

“We’re just friends,” I assured him, trying to make it sound inconsequential. The moment I said it though, I wasn’t sure if I was trying to convince him or convince myself. Every new day seemed to bring us closer together, but by a mutual if unsaid agreement, neither of us ever mentioned it. In retrospect, I think both of us were afraid that anything admitted on the subject of our relationship could drive the other away.

“I notice he comes to church with you,” Daddy pointed out. “But he’s still a Catholic...”

I fought back an impulse to remind him that this wasn’t the sixteenth century, but I knew it would damage the tenuous father-daughter bond we had been carefully forging for several weeks. Although he wasn’t exactly a fire and brimstone preacher, like many of our denomination, he had concerns about the motives of seemingly-casual Catholics. It was easy for him to conjure up a story of Mark being a ‘lapsed’ Catholic, even to the point of agreeing to join our church, but then later having an epiphany and fleeing back to the Catholic church while insisting that his children be raised Catholic. Yes, I know, to many people it wouldn’t matter, but to a Baptist minister—even a fairly liberal one—it was a potential problem.

Of course he had no way of knowing that Mark had never been Catholic: that was all part of his current life’s background, not his real one. I doubted if Mark would have known enough about the practice of the Catholic faith to fool any competent priest for a heartbeat.

“Daddy,” I said in as measured a tone as I could manage, “please don’t worry about Mark, okay?”

After a moment’s silence, he nodded his head.

Mark accepted the Thanksgiving invitation with pleasure, and after she checked with her mother, so did Myra. I had never met Myra's mother, but I knew she worked for Susan Jager. Maybe I'd be able to glean a little information about what was going on in Ovid, I thought. Of course, if I had known who my father was inviting...

"The Judge?"

"He's done a lot for our church," my father explained, a little miffed that I would question anyone on his list. We were eating Sunday dinner at *The Greenhouse* again, going over preparations for the following Thursday–Thanksgiving.

"I'm not opposed to it," I hastened to explain. "I was just surprised."

No, I certainly wasn't opposed to it at all. Any opportunity to get a face-to-face meeting with The Judge was worth taking. He was tight-lipped one-on-one, but in a social group, perhaps something significant might be gleaned from him. It beat waiting on the infrequent tidbits Dave passed on to me.

The rest of my father's list consisted of people I didn't really know—with one exception. "Professor Lowry? Does she go to our church, too?"

"Oh, yes," he told me. "She goes to the early service. That's probably why you haven't seen her. She says, by the way, that you've made a remarkable improvement in her class."

That was good to know. I enjoyed her class, but she wasn't an easy grader.

"I didn't know she was married," I commented, seeing a Mr. Lowry on the list. "She doesn't even wear a wedding ring."

"Oh yes," he replied. "Tom—her husband—is in charge of Information Systems at Ovid Memorial Hospital."

So it would be an interesting group at Thanksgiving dinner, I thought. I was certain Professor Lowry remembered a previous life, as did Mark and Myra. Myra had already told me that her mother remembered nothing of a previous life. So of the twelve of us enjoying the holiday together, at least five of us—including The Judge—knew there was

something not exactly normal about Ovid. When the big day arrived, I was beside myself with excitement.

“Just settle down,” Mark whispered to me when we were alone in the dining room. “Odds are we won’t learn anything new today. There’ll be too many people around. Besides, it’s a holiday, remember?”

We were busy setting the table while the other early guests—Myra and her mother—were helping my father in the kitchen.

“I wish Daddy wasn’t so insistent that we not have wine today,” I fretted. “A little wine might loosen The Judge’s tongue.”

“It probably wouldn’t have any effect at all,” Mark countered. “Besides, as I recall, you never used to drink, either.”

“I still don’t,” I replied. After all, that first night at *Randy Andy’s* really shouldn’t have counted. I was, well, confused then. I hadn’t had anything to drink since. I wasn’t just being prudish about abstaining from alcohol: I was honestly concerned that this new body of mine lacked any resistance to drink, and imbibing might throw me into slut mode again. That I simply wasn’t going to allow to happen.

The doorbell rang, and I leaped a foot in the air, calling, “I’ll get it!” as I ran to the door.

I had been hoping to see The Judge just for a moment by myself, and my hopes had been realized.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Joan,” The Judge said, smiling. He looked as he always did—conservative suit (this one a blue pinstripe that had to have cost a grand at least) and all. He wore no topcoat: Ovid was having a mild fall, which I had been told was pretty normal—probably due to The Judge’s influence. “I hear you’re doing very well these days.”

“I’m doing my best,” I told him honestly. Then, softly so as to not be heard by anyone except The Judge, I added, “I just wish I knew why you did this to me.”

“Because I’m doing my best, too,” he replied cryptically.

Before I could respond, my father walked in and greeted The Judge. My time alone with him had been too short. I realized that it would probably be my only opportunity that day to talk to him alone, and I had not had time to learn anything from him. I did at least remind myself that I could probably not have pried anything important out of him anyway. If I was to learn why Ovid existed, it would not come from The Judge. But who would it come from?

Professor Lowry and her husband were next to arrive. "Call me Denise today," she told me after I had formally addressed her. "We're not in class now."

She was a good at dinner table conversation as she was at lecturing a class. Her husband, a rather handsome shade, stayed in the background while his wife cheerfully orchestrated the table conversation without seeming to monopolize the discussion. Even The Judge was drawn into a particularly interesting topic.

As dinner had ended, we had been discussing the nature of God. It was the usual discussion—a loving, forgiving deity versus a jealous avenging entity. In other words, it was New Testament God versus Old Testament God. I had been in similar discussions almost from the time I had learned to talk. My father had been an Old Testament preacher, so that was the argument I was most familiar with. To my surprise, my new father leaned more toward the New Testament.

Denise did a masterful job of making the discussion flow without rancour, and regardless of which side one of the diners fell on in the argument, the tone had stayed calm and respectful. In a short time, nearly all of us had been heard from. The two exceptions were The Judge and me. I waited nervously for Denise to turn the conversation in my direction. Oh sure, I could say all the right things, as I had for years, but somehow, lying about my beliefs seemed a little more disingenuous than usual.

To my surprise, it was The Judge she turned to. He was directly across the table from Denise and me. "Tell me, Your Honor," she asked smoothly, "what do you think on this subject?"

He looked unruffled, as if he had been expecting the question. “I suppose that would depend upon whether or not you believe there is a God at all.”

There were quiet gasps from around the table. Mark, sitting on the other side of me, nearly choked on his water. From the corner of my eye, I could see my father’s eyes narrow in surprise and disapproval.

“So do you think there is a God?” Denise innocently asked.

“No,” The Judge replied, then added, “I don’t have to think about it. I know there is a God.”

“Then what is he like—to you I mean?” Denise prompted.

The Judge smiled. “He—if you must call him ‘he’ is unlike anything most people could ever imagine.”

In the silence that followed, Denise pressed, “Oh come now, Your Honor. You can’t leave it at that. Tell us about your image of God. We’re all friends here.”

The way she said that last sentence assured me that she knew very well who The Judge really was. As nearly as I had been able to tell, none of the guests, other than the ones I had already identified, knew who The Judge was or anything of the nature of Ovid. The unwitting guests listened casually for The Judge’s reply, but Myra, Mark and I fixed our gaze on The Judge while Denise simply managed to smile harmlessly.

The Judge measured his audience. I think in that moment, he realized he had already said more than he meant to. It was good to know that even deities could screw up. Still, he seemed to be debating with himself as to how much to tell us. To my surprise, he smiled. He had apparently made his decision.

“Do you really want to know?” he asked. There was a warning note to his voice, as if to tell us that there would be a price to be paid for this knowledge. I shifted uncomfortably. Something told me he was not asking if we really wanted to know his opinion. Instead, he was asking if we really wanted to know if there was a god.

Denise didn't budge an inch. "Please, tell us."

A chill went up my spine as The Judge spoke. His tone was reverent, but confident. "Do you really think the human mind can encompass a deity so great? That's why humans have so many different religions—all seeking to understand a mystery too great for them to comprehend. In the process, mistakes are made." Was it my imagination, or did he suddenly look into my eyes on purpose? "These mistakes can lead mankind to some rather poor conclusions."

I looked around. Most of the guests, including my father and Myra's mother, looked puzzled, but the rest of us knew he was telling us something mind-boggling: the gods of ancient man recognized a god above them! Could it be true? The gods of Greece and Rome—and perhaps the other gods as well—seemed to have powers far beyond human abilities. Could they also sense something beyond themselves? A Supreme Being? A true God?

The Judge continued, sweeping us up in his narrative, speaking of something so far beyond the narrow view most humans have of a god that he might have been speaking of something entirely different. The God of Moses, the God reaching out to man in the works of Michelangelo, the God our world religions had sought so hard to make us believe in were puny compared to The Judge's God.

In all honesty, I don't remember exactly what he said. He saw to that. Besides, it was as if he had been trying to describe quantum physics to Neanderthals. But while I might not remember exactly what he said, I knew what he meant:

There was a God.

I could no longer deny it. No, I didn't fall to the floor shouting hallelujah: none of us did. But in that few moments, we all believed in a way in which we had never believed before. Even my new father looked as if the scales had been removed from his eyes. While we could not remember exactly what The Judge had told us, we could remember enough, and we still knew it to be true—all of it.

There was a God.

“And now, I propose a toast!” The Judge called out suddenly, breaking the spell. As each of us looked down, we could see gleaming crystal goblets filled with sparkling liquid in front of each of the guests.

“Don’t worry, my friends,” The Judge assured us. “It isn’t wine: it’s only water—water from a very special river which flows... well, let’s say it flows far from here.”

Mechanically each of us reached for our glasses and raised them.

The Judge looked at Denise with a mischievous smile. “Did you really think I would let you remember what I have said?”

Water from a special river... one that flows far away... Lethe, no doubt! One of the rivers of Hades, whose waters brought forgetfulness. He intended to take the knowledge away from us and each of us knew we would be unable to resist. There was only one thing to do. I knew his exact words would be lost: the true nature of an all-knowing God would be lost to us. I had to hold onto one thought. If I could hold on to just a single thought, perhaps I could weave together the rest of it over time.

“To a new world!” The Judge declared, raising his own glass, but I knew what he drank would not affect him. I looked at the other, who sought unsuccessfully to keep the crystal glasses from their lips. Denise looked the most disturbed, but all of us sensed we were about to lose something very special. As each of us involuntarily raised our glasses to our lips, I thought:

There is a God. There is a God. There is a God...

The water tasted... wonderful, but as it filled my mouth, it also filled my mind, washing away with it the salient points of The Judge’s explanation.

There is a God. There is a God. There is a God!

I looked around. Everyone looked a little confused. Our hands were all posed near our faces, and yet they were empty and without apparent purpose.

“I’m afraid I must be going,” The Judge said suddenly, breaking the

mood. He rose to his feet. “Thank you, Reverend Sheppard—and Joan—for a marvellous meal. It was truly fit for the gods.”

My father smiled, pleased at the compliment. “Are you sure you can’t stay?”

“No, I’m afraid not. But a Happy Thanksgiving to all of you.”

And with that he left. The confusion died away, to be replaced with trivial but convivial conversation. None of us recalled The Judge’s revelations. I was left only with the odd thought that my belief in God had somehow been restored. Slowly, over the next few weeks, my memories returned, fuelled by my curious epiphany. But sadly, The Judge’s words are probably lost to me forever.

A new phase of my life began that night when Mark escorted me back to my dorm room. From my narrative, it will probably seem as if what happened was very sudden, but it was anything but sudden.

When my life had been turned upside down back in September, the lies I had been living in my male life were compounded by an entirely new set of lies. I was not really Joan Sheppard, but neither had I really been the man of God my followers believed me to be. Both lives were lies.

When I was changed, I had become a girl perfectly fashioned for her new life as a little college slut. I was attractive, with a past, a horny, possessive boyfriend, and a set of ne’er-do-well friends. Add to that, in spite of my new father’s threats, I learned that my mother had been from a well-to-do family, and I had been left a significant amount of money that was earmarked for my education. And for icing on the cake, I had a single room—the result of a probably-fictional roommate who had opted not to come to Capta at the last minute. In short, there I was, a perfect little tramp with all the fixings.

Yet I had overcome all of these things—mostly with Mark’s help. The rat of a boyfriend was gone, I had new friends, my single room was now used more for studying than anything else, and the rift with my

new father had been mostly repaired. My grades were not just better: they were excellent. My mode of dress had become more conservative.

Oh, I still dressed in a feminine fashion, make no mistake about that, but I looked more like a typical coed rather than a hooker. My makeup was more subdued, and I often wore jeans. Even my dress for Thanksgiving had been less provocative, a turtleneck instead of the low-cut numbers still hanging in my closet.

However, there was one thing my transformation had foisted upon me that I couldn't quite shake: I was as horny as a hoot owl.

It's odd, but reconciling the horny feelings with my new sex had created a faulty circuit. As a male, I had been celibate since the untimely death of my wife. No, it wasn't out of religious conviction or anything like that. Rather, it was as if all the interest I ever had in women had been bundled into my wife, and they had somehow died in the accident along with her and our unborn child. If The Judge had transformed me into another male as he had Aden, and I had suddenly been magically endowed with strong male sex urges, I have no doubt I would have acted upon them long before now.

But I had been changed into a young woman instead, and while imbued with strong sexual urges which had culminated in my unfortunate sexual activity the very night of my transformation, waking the next day with memories of my actions had shocked me into a long period of abstinence. I had made vows to myself no less binding than those young nuns make.

However, the urges were still there.

I began to play with myself in the shower. That wasn't always easy. After all, I did live in a dorm, and while I had a private room, I shared a bathroom with the other girls on my floor. That meant other girls used the shower as well. I probably wasn't the only girl to indulge in a little self-stimulation, but given the reputation that still followed me on campus, the last thing I wanted was for other girls to be whispering that I was absolutely insatiable and couldn't get enough guys to satisfy

me. Cries of self-pleasure emanating from the girls' shower would have impelled just such talk.

So through a combination of physical needs and the female hormones which had to be soaking my brain, my sexual attraction changed from a passive one for women to a more active one for men. It wasn't a sudden change, but every day that went by caused me to become more and more aware that I was attracted to men—one man in particular.

I didn't really think of Mark as my former associate Aden, anymore. Again, I'm not sure when all of that changed, but I had begun to see Mark as someone different from the intense man of God I had known. He was strong and handsome, so no one seemed surprised that I was going with him. But he was also caring and sensitive, and while he didn't speak much of it, given that his back story was apparently that of a lapsed Catholic, I could tell that his faith in God was as strong as ever. Since my own faith had been rekindled, being with him was spiritually like a freezing man—or woman, rather—sitting next to a warm fire.

In short, I found myself in love with Mark.

The problem was that I wasn't sure how Mark would accept me as a real woman. That was certainly what I had become. The weeks encased in female flesh had created a new me—one that thought and acted like a woman. Oh yes, I still had a burning need to find out why all of this had been done, but I now had other needs as well.

That brings me back to that Thanksgiving night, when Mark escorted me back to my room.

The drive from my father's house wasn't far—just a few blocks, really. Both of us were quiet as we drove through the cool late fall evening. I think it was a result of the drink The Judge had given us. While affecting our short-term memories, it seemed to have calmed us as well, putting us in an almost dreamlike state.

The dorm was as quiet as I could ever imagine. Many of the students were probably still celebrating Thanksgiving with family or friends, and

there would be no classes the next day. Some of the students had probably even left town to go home. Dave had told me that most of them didn't really leave town. Instead, they were kept somewhere—probably in a state of suspended animation—awakening upon their 'return' to Ovid with memories of trips they never really took. I wasn't sure if this was an acknowledged fact or just a supposition, but it made sense, given that we all knew there was no leaving Ovid without The Judge's permission.

Mark opened my door for me, checking around to make sure the room was secure. I felt a warm glow of affection for him, realizing that he was doing it to keep me safe. That's what he had been doing for me ever since the confrontation with Carl—keeping me safe.

Impulsively, I leaned up against him, stretching on my toes to raise my lips high enough to kiss him. It wasn't much of a kiss, really. In fact, it was almost sisterly, but Mark got a funny look on his face, and before I knew it, his arms were around me and he was kissing me. There was nothing brotherly about his kiss.

I didn't realize exactly how much sexual tension I had growing inside my body. Maybe a young woman who had grown up with a body like mine might have seen all the signs and not have been so surprised, but I was unfamiliar with what was happening to me. The shocking fact was that the moment he kissed me, my body reacted greedily, wanting still more. This held more promise than self-stimulation in the shower. I pressed closer to him, my tongue reflexively entering his mouth, and my breasts tingling insistently as they pressed against his chest.

I think we both knew that very moment that there was no stopping what was about to happen. Neither of us even tried. His hands were under my turtleneck, pulling it up over my breasts while I fumbled inexpertly at opening his pants. We must have made quite a pair: there was nothing soft and smooth in our actions. Instead, we pulled each other's clothing away as quickly as we could and literally fell into my bed.

There were no last-minute regrets running through my mind. I had

been female for several weeks now, and whatever male part of my mind remained, consisted of painful memories of a failed life. Instead, my mind was filled with anticipation, wondering what it would be like to make love as a woman. No, I didn't count the time right after my transformation. That certainly wasn't love.

Whether Mark was a truly talented lover or whether I was just so intensely needy, I couldn't say, but I was more than ready for him when he entered me. He actually took his time to build up my anticipation, so when I felt him inside me, I nearly exploded. It didn't take either of us long to climax, but I sighed in satisfaction when I realized that while his was over, mine seemed to just go on and on.

The second time around, we slowed the pace, and the third time was positively languid. But it was the fourth time when we woke up in the morning in each other's arms that was positively best of all.

"I love you," I breathed to him as we lay there together, letting the morning slip away. It was surprising how easily I had said it, but I was glad that I did.

"I love you too," he practically whispered with a smile as he pulled my naked body closer to his.

It was wonderful to cuddle in bed together. I hadn't had the opportunity to do that since before Rachel died...

Rachel...

It was funny, but I suddenly realized I hadn't thought of her by name in a long, long time. When I mentally thought of her, I just thought 'my wife.' And our unborn son was to have been called Jacob. Rachel and Jacob. I could think of them by name now. It no longer hurt so much that I couldn't bear to think of their names.

Oh, it still hurt. It would always hurt, but if The Judge was telling me the truth—and from what I understood from others, he had—then Rachel was alive again. And Jacob... well, he wouldn't be Jacob exactly, but maybe he had had a chance at life after all, with a new father and a mother who had never known me. I smiled to myself as I

realized how much of a miracle I was witnessing.

But miracles are the province of God: isn't that what I had always been taught? This miracle—or more accurately, this series of miracles—had been the work of a mythological deity with an agenda I still knew practically nothing about. And yet, for all his power, he honestly seemed to believe in a higher entity...

All right, my faith had been seriously weakened after Rachel's death. I had lost my ability to act on faith alone. But Ovid had shown me something more than faith. The gods didn't seem to trust in faith: they had something else to kindle their beliefs. What if the gods were simply a higher race of beings who, unknown to humans, shared the planet with them? We mere humans would have seen their powers such as transmutation as evidence of their godly power. But what if those powers had allowed them to sense—perhaps even communicate with—a higher being—a true God of gods—a being beyond full human comprehension, but within the understanding of creatures like The Judge?

As the afterglow of sex ebbed, I lay there in Mark's arms thinking less about sex and more about the gods. In the past few weeks, I had learned practically nothing new—until dinner with The Judge, of course. I needed to learn more though, such as what were the gods planning? I didn't like being an unwitting pawn in their game. I had to know more.

"Mark," I asked softly, "have you heard anything from Dave lately?"

He shrugged and rolled over, getting out of bed. It gave me a chance to admire his well-toned body and almost made me forget my question. "Not really," he said. "I guess new information comes in slowly."

"I suppose you're right," I agreed, getting up myself. "I guess we got spoiled at first, because so much of what he knew was brand new to us. Now, we know what everybody else knows."

"Maybe that's all we need to know," Mark ventured as he got dressed. I'm sure he wanted a shower, but it wouldn't look good for him to have one there on the girls' floor.

“What do you mean?” I had slipped on a robe. I’d shower later.

“Well...” Mark began, “after what The Judge told us yesterday, I’m willing to give things a rest.”

“A rest?”

He wilted when he saw the shocked look in my eyes, but then he explained, “Look, Joan, this life isn’t bad—not really. I mean, I wouldn’t have chosen it for myself, but I’ve been given the opportunity to live my life over.”

“You sound like you weren’t happy with your previous life,” I pointed out.

He shook his head. “No, my previous life was fine, but to be honest with you, while I had the faith for the ministry, I lacked the desire to serve. That’s why I hooked up with you. It wasn’t like having a regular congregation: it was more like... well, show business I guess. What’s so funny?”

I grinned. “It’s just that it’s so ironic,” I told him. “You had the faith, but not the ambition while I had the ambition but not the faith. I guess that’s why we made such a good team. Each of us had just what the other one needed.”

He looked puzzled. “You lost your faith? I never knew... never even suspected.”

“Don’t worry,” I reassured him. “I think I got it back. In fact, my faith is probably stronger than ever now. This time, it’s really my faith and not the faith of my father or grandfather being forcibly grafted onto me.”

“So, will you go into the ministry again?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “Maybe, or maybe not.” I was hedging. Actually, I might have recovered my faith, but I wasn’t sure that I’d go back into the ministry. To do that, I would have to have a clearer sign that I was being called. Right now, it was just enough to realize that when I said thank God, I wasn’t being a hypocrite. “How about you?”

“No way!” he snorted. “My grades are good...”

“Actually, they’re great,” I amended for him. “All A’s as nearly as I can tell.”

“Well, yes,” he admitted. “In fact, they’re good enough to get me into medical school. You see, Joan, I got into the ministry because I wanted to help people. I think this time around, I can help them more as a doctor than I ever could as a minister.”

Then he sat back down next to me on the bed and sighed. “The only problem is that I’m not sure how I can go to medical school. Capta doesn’t have a med school, and what if The Judge and his kind won’t let me leave Ovid to go someplace that has one?”

I stretched up, oblivious to my naked body, and gently rubbed his back. “I wouldn’t worry about it. Myra wants to be a lawyer, and there’s no law school here. She seems pretty sure she’ll be allowed to leave Ovid to attend one though.”

“Yeah,” Mark muttered, “but she tows the line around here. Is that what has to happen—I have to be a good little toady to be allowed to go?”

“Is that any different from anything else in life?” I pointed out. “If you’re not a ‘good little toady’ as you so eloquently put it, you don’t get to do a lot of things in life—go to a military academy, get promotions in business, go to seminary...”

“I suppose you’re right,” he sighed. “I just wish I had more control over what was going on.”

“Me, too,” I agreed, realizing once more that until I knew what the gods were up to, I too, would never feel entirely in control.

We parted reluctantly, but given that we would spend most of the rest of the weekend together (and a good portion of that time would probably be spent in bed—at least if I had anything to say about it), it was scarcely a hardship.

I had planned to hole up in my room for the weekend and study. While I had brought my grades up considerably, the previous Joan had dug a very deep hole for me, so I was still a little behind the power curve.

My father wanted me to come home for the long weekend, but I had declined. When I told him my plans to study, he could scarcely argue, but I could see that he was disappointed.

To be honest, I was concerned that the decent relationship we had forged over the last few weeks would be all for naught if we had to live under the same roof, but given his disappointment, I did agree to come 'home' Saturday and stay until Sunday evening. That seemed to be an appropriate compromise. Although I was falling more and more into my role as a young woman, I could only take being daddy's little girl for so long.

The long weekend actually went by very fast. I made good on my word and studied all of Friday. Then that evening, Mark and I got together and after a quick dinner and a movie, we retired to my room and continued where we had left off the previous evening.

I was happy to note that our satisfaction with each other's sexual prowess a few days earlier hadn't just been a fluke. The sex was downright wonderful, and unlike my rough introduction to sex immediately after my transformation, what Mark and I were enjoying was more than animalistic behavior—it was love.

My father picked me up late the next morning and we settled in for the rest of the weekend. Mark ended up going to a football party Saturday night. It seemed the players blew off steam celebrating the end of a good football season, so I was stuck at home.

Since my father was busy preparing for Sunday services, I was pretty much at loose ends. I used the time to go through old family albums and documents, to familiarize myself with the family I had been thrust into. In the process, I ran across my 'parents' wedding pictures. Elizabeth Cameron Sheppard had been a beautiful woman it turned out, and I found a strange pang of loss that I couldn't explain. She had supposedly died when I was quite young, and almost as if I had always been Joan, I found myself wishing that I had gotten to know her.

My new father, the Reverend Blakely Z. Sheppard had been a

handsome young man as well. He wasn't bad looking for a middle-aged man now, but the years had taken something of a toll on him. I would imagine raising a willful daughter almost by himself had had something to do with that. I wondered what the 'Z' stood for, but I couldn't find it spelled out anywhere.

Sunday services took on a new meaning for me. After the encounter with The Judge on Thanksgiving, I seemed to feel the presence of God during services like I never had before. Even in the days of my youth, before I had lost the faith my family had thrust upon me, I had never felt the presence of God so strongly. Who would have thought that I would recover my faith under the auspices of a bunch of mythological gods?

In short, the weekend was probably one of the most meaningful times of my life—new or old. I had reconciled nearly all of the conflicts in my new life. I had come to terms with my new sex, my relationship with my father had been strengthened, I had gotten caught up in all of my schoolwork, Mark had become the new love of my life, and I had regained my faith in God. By all rights, my story should have ended there, but it didn't.

Not by a long shot. The first inklings of trouble came on Monday. After lunch with Mark, I was heading to my next class when Dave came up beside me. His expression was very serious, and for the first time in several days, I felt nervous. "I have something important to tell you," he murmured to me.

"What?"

He shook his head. "Not now. I think I'm being watched. Meet me in the basement stacks at five."

I had been on campus long enough to know that the basement stacks in the library were nearly always deserted. They were the repository for old, musty books that weren't important enough to be on the regular shelves but couldn't in all good conscience be thrown away. I had thought about going through them sometime to see if they shed any light on Ovid's existence, but nearly everyone I talked to said that

it would be a lost cause. Over time, every book in the basement stacks had been reviewed and produced nothing. The air was said to be so cloying that even lovers seeking a private place to meet shunned the basement stacks.

So why had Dave chosen them for our meeting?

Dave hadn't been specific about our meeting place, so I stayed as close to the elevator as I could. Frankly, the place gave me the creeps. While Ovid had a virtually nonexistent crime rate, I was still a defenseless girl standing around in an isolated spot. I didn't want to challenge Ovid's low crime statistics by being stupid. One funny sound and I'd either be on the elevator or racing up the steps to safety.

The elevator was coming in my direction. Although there was no little light and a dinging bell to announce its arrival, I could hear the car coming to a rest. The door opened slowly, and I was expecting to see Dave. But instead, it was someone I had never expected.

"Professor Lowry?"

I started to ask her what she was doing there, but the smug look on her face told me that it was she I was to meet with and not Dave.

"Surprised?" she asked, stepping from the elevator, her heels clicking on the concrete floor.

"Yeah," I admitted. "So you're part of Dave's network?"

She smiled. "No, he's part of mine."

"Then why did you ask me to meet you here?" I asked. "Wouldn't your office have been more convenient?"

She shook her head. "More convenient, yes, but far more dangerous. You'd be surprised how widespread The Judge's network of spies really is. I've been very careful to keep all evidence of my group secret for ten years now. Our work is too important to risk detection."

"I thought you just traded information back and forth."

She smiled. "That's what people like Dave and your boyfriend think. People like Dave are useful since they collect tidbits of information,

but only a very few of us know what's really going on."

"And are you going to tell me what's going on?" I asked, a little miffed that she had toyed with all of us for so long.

To my surprise, she laughed, "Yes, Joan, I think I will. But first, I need something from you. I need you to tell me what you remember of The Judge's little tirade at your house."

I shrugged. "Nothing much, although I'll admit I've been trying to remember. That drink he gave us must have taken away our memories."

"For the most part it did," she agreed. "But I already knew some of it already, so the drug had virtually no effect on me."

"So why did you ask me about what I remembered?" I wanted to know. Was she just toying with me again?

"Because if you remembered, it would make what I have to say a little easier," she replied, absently brushing some of the dusty air away from her tan skirt. "First, I want to tell you who I am—or rather, who I was. My name will mean nothing to you, but once upon a time, I was one of the most renowned scholars of Religious History in the world, holding a chair at Yale, no less. I was the author of a number of books—some of which were even best-sellers. I consulted with religious leaders and heads of state. I was even the subject of a cover story in *Time*."

"Who were you?" I asked her, thinking I must have known of her, but her reply quashed that idea.

"My name would mean nothing to you," was her disgusted reply. "No one outside of Ovid has heard of me for these past ten years, ever since I 'died' in an auto accident after a visit to Oral Roberts University in Tulsa. Like nearly everyone else here in Ovid, my real past was erased. Can you imagine? There I was, one of the top scholars on the planet one minute, and the next, an unknown history professor in a third-rate college no one has ever heard of—and I was a woman to boot! Can you imagine what it's like to have to make love to a man

who isn't even really a man?" She shuddered at the thought of her shade husband.

By now, she was practically shouting, and I could tell from the look in her eyes that she was as furious about her transformation now as she had been a decade ago when it first happened. But what a skilled performer she was, to have lived in Ovid so long without the gods knowing how her hatred had festered. Surely if they had suspected, they would have taken some action, since it seemed to be important to them that everyone settled willingly into their new lives—just as Mark and I had. Perhaps they had dismissed her as being only superficially important to their cause—not worth observing in detail.

As if realizing her error, she calmed down at once, and continued, "But there's nothing I can do about all of that now. What I can do—and must do for the sake of humanity—is stop The Judge and his minions from carrying out their plans. You, Joan, can help me do that."

"It would be helpful if I knew what plan you're talking about," I reminded her. I wasn't sure if I wanted to help her stop The Judge or not. Sure, I wanted to know what The Judge was up to, but not if it meant risking a life I had come to appreciate.

"You were a minister," she said suddenly. "You know the power of God, and you know that in a contest of world religions, the strong faiths survive and the weak ones perish."

She seemed to be waiting for my response, so I nodded. In general, she was correct. Satisfied, she continued, "Now that the world has become such a small place, there's only room for one religion—one God. The Moslems know this. That's why they war upon the West and Christianity. Europe has lost its way—it's faithless and will soon be taken over by Moslems. If there is to be only one religion, it must be ours—the Christian religion."

It was an old story, I mused to myself, and not a very pretty one. While my faith in the existence of a God had been restored, that didn't mean I was willing to follow in the path of my father and grandfather in determining that there was only one absolute path to Him. Professor

Lowry would have found more common ground with them than with me, but I remained silent. I wanted to know where she was going with all of this.

But apparently, I was expected to participate. “Do you realize what’s happening here in Ovid?” she asked me.

“Regarding what?”

She sighed dramatically. “I’m talking about The Judge’s plan. Do you have any idea what’s going on here?”

“No, no one does,” I replied, becoming even more concerned from her increasing agitation that she was a few sheets short of a ream. This was a side of her I had never witnessed before—one I had never imagined. It was obvious she had come to Ovid with preconceived notions of God and religion. Apparently, during her stay here, she had honed her beliefs to the point that she was convinced that her way was the only way. Sadly, I had seen such zealotry among some of my colleagues before. It never boded well.

“The Judge has enemies,” she told me. “No, don’t ask who they are. We have no idea, since their actions are quickly hushed up. But we’ve stayed under the radar, so to speak, so we’ve been able to piece together most of it. The Judge and his cohorts plan to introduce a new religion—one to replace Christianity!”

“That’s absurd,” I blurted out. “They go to church—all of them from what I’ve heard. Some of his... associates aren’t Baptists, but they go to other churches. If they weren’t Christians, why would they do that?”

Her grin was practically feral. “Are you sure? If they’re all Christian, what are they doing with another Ovid in the Middle East?”

“I haven’t heard of that.”

“Few have,” she said slyly. “They’re not happy to undermine our own religion. They want to take down the Moslems, too. For all we know, they may be after all of the other major religions as well. Wouldn’t it be funny if somewhere in Israel, there’s a kibbutz run by them?”

I was now convinced she was crazy. But in spite of that, I was curious.

Why had she called me in—just to have an audience for her ranting? It didn't seem likely. She was planning something, and the way she was acting, I was pretty sure I didn't want any part of it.

Still, I was curious, so I had to ask, "So how are they doing all of this?"

"By producing the Antichrist!" she shot back.

I couldn't help but give her a sceptical look. "And I suppose in the Middle East, they're producing an Anti-Muhammad, and maybe an Anti-Buddha in India..."

"I can prove it," she countered, very sure of herself. "Then you'll see."

"But why are you telling all of this to me?" I finally asked, frightened of what the answer might be, but I had to know just the same.

"I know who you were," she explained. "Oh, don't look so surprised. I know the world outside Ovid has forgotten you, but here, we remember. You'd be amazed the things we remember from timelines these bastards have disrupted. You were a man of God—a champion of Christianity, and now we need your help."

"We? You mean your group?"

"Not the group you're thinking of," she retorted. "Too many of them are just curious. They wouldn't take action no matter what. But there are a few of us—just a few, mind you—who want to end this charade and destroy the challenge to our faith. We've been watching you for a long time, and we think you should be one of us."

I was getting a little tired of this. "So do I have to pass an initiation or something?"

"Or something," she said with a malevolent grin. "The time is nearly upon us to act. We know what needs to be done."

I didn't know what she had in mind, but it couldn't be good. I had heard the rumors of what The Judge had done to those transformees who opposed him. A good number of them were rumored to be storing acorns for the winter over in Sooner Park. I had no desire to be a featured player on Animal Planet.

“What if I choose not to join you?” I ventured.

“Then nothing will happen,” she explained calmly. “Oh, you’ll be watched, of course. If we see you trying to tell The Judge or one of his kind about us, we’ll try our best to stop you. As you’ve probably assumed, killing anyone here is difficult, but not impossible.”

Was that true? I had assumed that any attempt at a crime like murder would bring about immediate reaction from the gods. But then I remembered: according to most myths, the Greek or Roman gods were powerful, but not all-knowing. Maybe it was a bluff and maybe not.

One thing I was pretty certain of though, was that she wasn’t bluffing when she indicated that she had a plan to end The Judge’s power over Ovid. There was something important that she knew that she just wasn’t telling me. As much as my common sense was trying to tell me to run away as fast as I could, I really did want to know what was happening in Ovid. Although I knew it was dangerous to proceed, I felt much like Neo in The Matrix. If I didn’t go down the rabbit hole, I’d forever wonder what I had missed. I told myself that no matter what I agreed to, I’d find a way to pull out if I had to.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

Professor Lowry relaxed noticeably. “I thought you’d agree. With your help, the Antichrist will fail. In fact, he’ll never be born.”

Uh-oh. “You plan to kill his mother?”

“And his father,” she admitted triumphantly. “They’re both young children now. It won’t be difficult.”

Oh my God! “Children?”

“We know because others have tried to kill them...”

‘And apparently failed,’ I thought to myself.

“All we have to do is wait for the right moment. No one suspects us. There are only four of us—five with you. No one suspects a thing. All you need to do is wait for our call.”

As I left the meeting, I was in a terrible quandary. Part of me wanted to rush off to warn The Judge. I wanted no part of Professor Lowry's mad scheme to kill two innocent children. Besides, fanatics had been yammering about an Antichrist for centuries, and while I was now willing to believe in God, I was having a hard time imagining devils and demons prancing about to raise the antithesis of Christ.

On the other hand, a case could be built for it. The old gods had been supplanted by the Christian religion. Once Christ had been accepted in the Roman world, the worship of Jupiter all but disappeared. Could it be that the Roman gods had devised a plan to get even? But if so, what did the town of Ovid have to do with it?

Either way, there was no way I was going to take part in the murder of two innocent children. I'd have to learn who they were and somehow get word to The Judge.

"Where have you been?" Mark called out to me as I approached the dorm.

"Meeting with one of my professors," I replied casually. Strictly speaking, that was true. Besides, I didn't want to get Mark mixed up in this mess.

"You want to study for awhile and then go out for a pizza?"

"Sure," I replied. The fact of the matter was that I didn't want to study at all. My mind was churning with possible scenarios, and my studies were the last thing I wanted to think about. What I really wanted was to forget all of this, haul Mark back to my room, and make love to him for hours.

But instead, we studied—or at least Mark studied. After a couple of hours, we were at Tony's sharing a pizza.

"Something troubling you?" Mark asked, apparently tired of my distracted silence.

"Huh?"

"You've been acting... funny. Did I do something that bothered you?"

“Oh, no. I’m sorry, Mark,” I said quickly, resting my hand on his. “I just was thinking about something—it isn’t important.”

I think he knew I was lying, but he didn’t say anything more about it. I wanted to tell him what had happened, but I didn’t want to drag him into what could be a very dangerous situation. The less Mark knew about this the better.

I had noticed that we were being shadowed. Obviously, Professor Lowry wanted me on her side. She was a zealot, and so in her mind, the fact that I had been a prominent evangelist meant that I should be on her side. In fact, my support would essentially be confirmation of her beliefs and planned actions. But she really didn’t trust me—not yet at least. As a result, she would have me watched. The tough-looking guy who had been following us at a discrete distance—and who even now was sitting at a table not too far from us, trying to appear disinterested in our discussion—was obviously there to make certain I didn’t try to warn The Judge.

There was an urgency to the situation: I was certain of it. I didn’t think Professor Lowry would tell me what she had unless she planned to take action very soon—perhaps within the next day. Or maybe she had started to regret taking me into her confidence at all. I hadn’t enthusiastically backed her plan, so maybe the tough guy was there to deal with me once Mark had dropped me off. No matter what, I knew that I didn’t dare let anyone else know what I knew. It would endanger both my life and theirs.

When we got back to my room, I was so upset that I was in no mood to make love. To his credit, Mark sensed that and didn’t insist. “Do you want me to go?” he asked.

“No,” I sighed. “I don’t want to be alone. Could you please just... hold me?”

And that was how we spent the night together.

After a fitful night with little sleep, I had come up with something of a

plan. I knew Myra's mother worked for Susan Jager, and our former attorney in turn was a good friend of Cindy Patton, The Judge's assistant. If I could somehow get word to Myra, maybe she could get word back through that chain to The Judge. Of course, I had no idea who the endangered children were, but I was certain that even if Professor Lowry was way off base, he would be able to figure out who the targets were.

"Let's take a shower and go get some breakfast," Mark suggested, squeezing me gently as we lay together in bed.

"Okay," I agreed. "But I have to check on something with Myra first." I picked up the dorm phone and dialed Myra's extension quickly before Mark could say anything. I'd see if she was in and arrange a quick meeting before any potential watchers saw me.

But there was no answer. Then I remembered. She was at her mother's house. I used my phone to call her there, but her mother told me she was out. "She's going to be babysitting all day," she informed me.

"Where can I reach her?" I asked. "It's important."

Sure, I could have told Myra's mother directly, but the poor woman had no idea what was really going on in Ovid. There was no sense in alarming her, and besides, I needed to talk to someone who would understand the importance of my warning, and that person was Myra. She would be able to call Susan or Cindy directly—something I couldn't do with Mark around, or I'd involve him.

"She's going to be at the Pattons' house today," she replied, and gave me the number. "She's babysitting for the Pattons and the Jagers."

This was a stroke of luck, I realized. Since Myra was already at the Pattons' house, she would be able to tell Cindy Patton as soon as she got home. All I needed to do was pull her aside for a few minutes, so I didn't involve Mark in what was happening, and leave the rest to her. As soon as she had talked to Cindy Patton, I was sure The Judge would be in the loop before much longer.

Maybe I was worrying too much, I second-guessed myself. Surely Professor Lowry did really mean to kill innocent children, did she? I dismissed that thought quickly, though. I had looked into her eyes and seen her determination. She was honestly convinced that the Antichrist was to be created in Ovid, and nothing would stop her.

“Let’s forget the showers,” I told Mark, a note of urgency in my voice. “I really need to see Myra right now.”

Mark was obviously puzzled, but he said nothing. In response, he slipped on his jeans and pulled out his car keys. “Can you tell me what’s going on?” he asked.

“Thanks, Mark,” I told him sincerely as I hugged him. “I’ll explain later.” As I said, I really didn’t want to involve Mark. I was already in danger if I betrayed Professor Lowry’s confidence—as I sincerely planned to do. There was no sense in putting Mark in danger, too. The less he knew, the better.

The Pattons lived in one of the newer parts of Ovid in a nice but not particularly expensive house. Given Cindy Patton’s job, I had expected something a little more upscale, but I supposed that would be out of character. I wondered where The Judge lived. No one seemed to know, but given the Pattons’ house, I imagined it would be a little more expensive but not exactly the digs on Mount Olympus.

Myra’s car was in front of the house, but I didn’t see any signs of activity around the place. I gently rapped on the door, in case some of her wards were taking a nap.

“Joan!” she exclaimed happily as she came to the door. “What brings you over here?”

I looked back at Mark, who had walked me to the door. “I’m fine now,” I told him. “I’ll call you later, okay?”

I expected him to nod and go back to his car, but instead and without warning, he grabbed me by the arm and shoved me inside, nearly knocking Myra over. I heard a girl scream and thought she was upset about Mark, but I realized it was coming from the family room where a

TV was blaring away. The children were reacting to whatever was on the screen and had no idea what was happening in the front of the house. Maybe that was for the best.

When Mark had shut the door behind him, he stared at Myra and me threateningly. I had never seen him act like this before. I'm sure we both had looks of shock and fear on our faces. I knew Myra did, from a glance at her, and I was certainly shocked and suddenly concerned. Mark had been a gentle, considerate lover, but he was big enough and strong enough to be threatening if he wanted to be.

And for some reason, he wanted to be.

"Mark, what's this all about?" I asked, unable to keep a tremble out of my voice. I was confused and frightened, but worse yet, I felt betrayed.

"I'm sorry, Joan," he told me. "I'll explain. But I need both of you to cooperate. Please sit on the couch and don't disturb the children."

"I'm not sitting anywhere!" Myra huffed, started to slip past Mark, but before she could, he grabbed her by the arm and swung her down on the couch.

"Sit!" he commanded both of us.

Mark was quick enough and strong enough that I was pretty sure both Myra and I together wouldn't be a match for him. Reluctantly, we both sat.

Mark took a quick look out the front window. "This shouldn't take long," he promised us. "Professor Lowry should be here shortly."

"Professor Lowry?" I blurted out. "What does that wing nut have to do with..."

My voice trailed off. She had told me of two children who, according to her warped reasoning, were due to be the parents of the Antichrist. If memory served me correctly, Cindy Patton had a little girl who might fit the bill. "Oh my God, Mark, do you have any idea what that woman is up to?"

“She wants to get the answers to Ovid,” Mark replied. “Joan, she’s after the same things we’re after. She wants to know why this was done to us.”

“She wants nothing of the sort!” I retorted. “She thinks she already has the answers. She thinks Ovid is to be the birthplace of the Antichrist—and unless I miss my guess, she thinks Cindy Patton’s daughter is due to be one of his parents.”

“That’s impossible!” Mark said, but I noticed a sudden stricken look on Myra’s face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

Myra tried to hide her alarm, but it was plastered all over her face. “Nothing’s wrong,” she lied.

We were interrupted by the slamming of car doors. Then, without knocking, Professor Lowry, flanked by two beefy guys—one of whom had been shadowing Mark and me earlier—burst in the room. “Make sure they’re both here,” she ordered, and one of the guys poked his head in the den.

“Both here,” he confirmed. “They’re all busy watching TV. They don’t suspect a thing. Do you want me to do them here?”

“Do them?” Now it was Mark’s turn to look stricken.

“Of course,” Professor Lowry told him. “They’re the future parents of the Antichrist. They can’t be allowed to live.”

They? So that was what Myra was hiding. Both of the children were here. And since her mother had told me she was babysitting Susan Jager’s son as well as the Patton kids, that meant he was to be the future father of the little Patton girl’s child.

Mark shook his head. “I never agreed to any of this. You told me you just wanted to find out what was planned and stop it.”

“I am stopping it,” she shot back. “How else would I stop it if I didn’t kill the would-be parents? You’re weak. That’s why I didn’t tell you. You helped us by watching your girlfriend for us. I never should have told

her about all of this, but I thought she'd be stronger, given who she was before. Obviously, you're both fair-weather Christians. I'm sorry now that I ever confided in either of you."

"You'll never get away with this!" Myra taunted them. "You've got no place to run to."

Professor Lowry's smile was triumphant. "Is that what you think—that we plan to run away? You little bitch, we want to stand before your precious Judge and brag about what we are about to do. When we're finished here, we will have done everything we could to save our faith from these twisted... things."

Then she turned to her henchmen. "Go get the children—now!"

The two men were headed for the den when Mark jumped one of them. It was a doomed attempt from the very start. While Mark was big and in very good shape, the two men were bigger—and meaner. Myra and I made an attempt to go after the other guy, but Professor Lowry surprised me by tripping me. As I looked up, one of the men backhanded Myra, sending her sprawling across the room. From the sound her jaw made when the back of his hand hit it, I was pretty sure she had a broken jaw.

Mark was quickly overwhelmed. The two men worked him over as we helplessly watched. Strangely, even then the children were not disturbed. It was as if they were oblivious to what was happening just a few feet away.

They got to their feet, leaving Mark bruised and battered on the floor. They headed once more for the den...

But they never made it. They had been rushing, as if to scoop up the two small children (we learned later that the older Patton siblings were at friends' houses) before they could cry out or run away. As they reached the edge of the den, they were thrown back, as if several times their forward momentum had been turned against them. Both men literally flew across the room, crashing through the drywall of the opposite wall and splitting the wooden two-by-fours that formed the frame.

“Wha...?” Professor Lowry began, taking a few tentative steps toward the den.

“Don’t try it,” a familiar voice called out from the doorway.

“Officer Mercer!” I called out. “Stop her. She’s trying to hurt the kids.”

“She won’t be hurting anyone today,” he promised us. “No harm can approach the children.”

They were somehow shielded, I realized. Professor Lowry had told me that others had tried to kill the children. However, what she hadn’t realized was that those attempts had made the gods wary. I later learned that anyone planning to injure either of the children would be unable to approach them, or cause any harm to befall them.

Professor Lowry must have realized this in that moment: she tried to run past Officer Mercer, but her objective was no longer the den. Her previous objective was now forgotten, and in her panic, she could only think to get away as she tried to avoid the god and make it to the door. Officer Mercer’s arm shot out faster than anything I’d ever seen. His hand clamped onto her arm so quickly, it nearly pulled her off her feet. She was screaming out, but I couldn’t make out her words. Whether she was trying to say something forbidden or just incoherent from her unexpected failure, I couldn’t say.

A couple of men entered while Officer Mercer took her to his car. I hadn’t seen them before. They weren’t dressed as deputies, but they had obviously come at Officer Mercer’s request. Wordlessly, they each picked up the two stunned bruisers and carried them out over their shoulders, as if they weighed only a few pounds each. Whoever the men were, they must have been gods themselves.

But the parade through the front door wasn’t over yet. The next person to enter was quite unexpected.

“Your Honor,” Myra called out from the floor as The Judge strolled in.

The Judge surveyed the room. “I see some repairs are in order,” he mused. Then, leaning down to Myra and cupping her swelling jaw, he said, “Let’s start here.” He waved his hand in front of Myra’s face.

As we watched, the swelling went down, and in moments, Myra's jaw was back to normal.

"What about Mark?" I asked him, nodding to his broken form, barely conscious across the room.

The Judge looked at Mark impassively. "He was with your attackers, wasn't he?"

"At first, yes," I admitted. "But he never had anything to do with the plan to harm the children."

The Judge considered this. Then he looked at Myra. "Is this true?"

Myra nodded. "Mark tried to stop them from hurting the children. I suppose if he hadn't sacrificed himself, they might have harmed them before Officer Mercer arrived."

I had to smile at that. Myra would have never had any trouble entering the den, so she wouldn't have realized that there was a shield in place.

The Judge looked somewhat pleased at her answer. I supposed there were enough people for him to mete out punishment to without adding Mark to the list. He waved his hand once more, and Mark's entire body rippled for a few moments, then relaxed. He was still unconscious, but I could tell he was resting peacefully now, uninjured and unmarked.

"What's going to happen to Professor Lowry and her men?" I asked, more out of curiosity than concern. After all, she and her henchmen had been ready to murder two small children based on a theory I could scarcely believe.

The Judge's response surprised me. "What do you think should be done to them, Joan?"

"I... I'm not sure," I had to admit. "The only thing I can say is they should never be able to harm children again." Once more, the vision of squirrels in Sooner Park came unbidden into my mind. I had certainly had no indication that The Judge could read my mind, and I hoped that was the case.

“Those who are transformed into infants normally lose their adult memories,” The Judge told me. “Do you think that would suffice as punishment for them?”

It would be a long time before any of them could harm children if they were reduced to infancy, I reasoned. Of course, if only their adult memories were lost, their basic personalities might remain, and they might grow up with the same poisoned minds. However, in the right family, Professor Lowry could grow up with a religious foundation that was more geared to a loving god rather than a vengeful one. The alternative could always be life as squirrels.

Finally, I nodded in agreement. “That sounds like an equitable solution.”

The Judge smiled. “Then that’s what will happen to them.” He was silent for a moment before adding, “Joan, can I see you outside for a few minutes?”

“Uh... sure,” I agreed, heading for the front door.

“No,” he stopped me. “Let’s go out in back. There will be less of a chance for interruptions there.”

I wasn’t sure why he thought that, but I walked with him into the backyard. Then I saw why we wouldn’t be interrupted. One moment, we were standing in the Pattons’ backyard, brown and lifeless in the throes of the approaching winter. Then the next moment, the yard faded from view, and an iris opened up into a rolling meadow, with fields of brilliant flowers of every imaginable color. There was no sign of the house—or any other structure for that matter.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” The Judge said calmly.

“Where are we?” I asked as the most beautiful bird I had ever seen flew by, resplendent with blue and green feathers and red wingtips. Its song was so soothing I felt almost like reaching out for it so as not to lose the sweet sounds it made.

“The most common name for this place is the Elysian Fields,” he replied, making a gesture with his hands. The beautiful bird turned in a

sweeping arc and came to rest perched on his outstretched arm. “The ancient Greeks and the Roman after them thought that this was a form of afterlife—reserved for nobles, heroes and gods, of course. For the common man... well, it was a rather structured society, I suppose. The common man had no place here, I’m afraid.”

“That’s mythology,” I argued. “Some even say it was the model for Heaven.”

He smiled, dropping his arm to allow the bird to continue its flight.

“Yes, that’s very true—or at least the afterlife part is mythology.

Actually, it’s an alternate world, slightly removed from our own world.

We can visit here for short periods of time—mostly to refresh ourselves or to have private conversations, such as the one we’re having now. I suppose it was after such a conversation with one of your kind that the afterlife assumption began. In truth, no one from our world can stay here long. The world somehow ejects us after a few short hours.

We’re not certain why, but there it is.”

“And what was so important that you needed to talk to me privately?” I wanted to know.

He was silent for a minute. Then, at last, he began, “I understand Professor Lowry told you that the two children whose lives you just saved were intended to be the parents of the Antichrist. Did you believe her?”

“Not exactly,” I hedged.

“Not exactly?” Did I detect a wariness in his voice?

“What I meant,” I explained, “was where there’s smoke, there’s often fire. Professor Lowry may have been overzealous and paranoid in her reasoning, but her background in religious studies would mean that she is perfectly capable of gathering all the right facts, even if she reached the wrong conclusion.”

“You mean the conclusion regarding the Antichrist.”

“Of course.”

The Judge looked out over the lovely landscape, momentarily lost in

thought. At last, he spoke, although it seemed to me that he was speaking as much to himself as to me. "If she reached the conclusion that an Antichrist was in the offing, others may as well. In fact, they may have already reached that conclusion with her help. That could be very dangerous to our plans."

"It might help if I knew what the plan was," I prodded as calmly as I could. For the first time since I had been dropped into Ovid, I felt as if The Judge was ready to tell me the truth about his motives.

"Joan," he began, "have you ever wondered why your people ceased to worship us as gods? After all, in the Western world, we were the dominant deities."

"Maybe because you aren't really gods, are you?" I ventured.

He shook his head. "No, we are not. We are merely another race—a more talented race, of course, but certainly not gods. But I must tell you, being recognized as gods is quite a positive experience. Imagine if people from your time were to visit ancient Athens or Rome. Your superior technology would cause the people then to see you as deities as well."

"And you had that technology," I supplied, but he shook his head.

"No, of the three races who could be called manlike, only yours is technological. The Neanderthals simply lacked the proper cognitive abilities, and our own race was blessed—or perhaps cursed—with endless life and a penchant for powers others viewed as magical. When you have the power to conjure up anything you wish, it becomes unnecessary to 'invent' things.

"We developed a symbiotic relationship with your race. You looked just like us—in fact, we could even breed with your kind, although our powers were usually lost upon our offspring—and your primitive struggles at civilizing yourselves caught our fancy. We were content to play gods to your ancestors, even helping them at times."

"And simply meddling with them at others," I observed. Under his stern look, I clarified, "You really did meddle, you know, if some of the myths

are right. You took sides in wars, played tricks on humans...”

The look softened as he nodded his head. “Mistakes were made: I’ll concede that. But, of course, we also helped—farming, a written language, even fire were all gifts from us. Of course, the fire thing wasn’t handled too well... However, we did, as you said, meddle, producing organized wars, dictatorships, and slavery—all unintentionally, I should add.

“But then two things happened that made us rethink our actions. The first was when the humans in the Greek and Roman world began to fashion more technological devices. War became more efficient—more deadly—and your societies became more complex. We began to realize that your technological nature was not only alien to us, but abhorrent and dangerous as well.

“Even of greater importance, though, was our realization that there was something beyond us—a god, if you will. We had no need of higher beings, for we were immortal with no afterlife to attract us. Still, in our minds, we began to feel the presence of something far more powerful and infinitely wiser than we could have ever imagined.”

As I listened to him tell this, I realized, not for the first time, what a fool I had been. In my youth, I had been a fool to believe in a small, capricious, and vengeful deity, but once I had forsaken that god, I had not been able to imagine any other. Yet here was the ‘King of the Gods’ telling me that there was something beyond—something my tiny human mind had not been able to grasp before now.

“What did... God say to you?” I finally asked.

After a pause, The Judge replied, “He asked for our help.”

It was certainly not the answer I had been expecting.

The Judge went on to tell me about how each of the Roman gods had heard (or maybe ‘felt’ was more accurate) from God a desire to get humans set on a course which would bring mankind into harmony with each other and their planet. At times, what he told me smacked almost of the Gaia beliefs—appropriate, I suppose, since Gaia was the earth

goddess in Greek myths. But it wasn't just Gaia: all the Christian concepts were there as well, along with a few things borrowed from some of the other world religions—particularly the Moslem faith.

When The Judge had completed his interpretation of God's will, I asked, "So what did he want you to do—to help I mean?"

"He wanted us to prepare the way for his son," The Judge stated simply. "We were to create a town—Nazareth by name—and make it the sort of place the Savior could flourish in..."

Create a town? It hit me like a flash—a concept so incredible I could barely conceive of it. They had created Nazareth, and now... "He... he's coming again, isn't he? Christ is coming again."

The Judge shook his head. "No, not Christ. Christ's work on this world is done. As nearly as we can tell, he's moved on—to other worlds, or at least to other realities. We can't be sure which. But we've heard God's call again—or at least some of us think we have."

"Professor Lowry was right about one thing. The children—they're to be the parents not of the Antichrist but of a new Messiah," I reasoned. "But you sound as if there is some dissension in your ranks this time."

The Judge nodded. "There is. You see, as it turns out, we need a new Messiah as much as humans do..."

The Judge explained that a large faction of the ancient deities really felt as if mankind had strayed from the proper path and had been straying for centuries. Then came the Holocaust and the atomic bomb. The first had merely substantiated the gods' belief that man had strayed so far from the proper path that he had become capable of unimaginable cruelty. The second had proven man's ability to efficiently and effectively eliminate large masses of people almost effortlessly—and in the process, unknowingly, mankind had found a way to kill otherwise immortal beings.

"It began in Hiroshima," he explained. "Several of our kind were there—we're really quite widespread you know, representing dozens of ancient religions. And we all sense each other."

“Like you sense God?” I asked.

“In a similar fashion,” he admitted. “In any case, we lost contact with our people in Hiroshima. It turned out that they were as vulnerable to the power of the atomic bomb as your people are. So you see,” The Judge concluded, “not only is mankind threatening suicide with nuclear weapons, but genocide of our race as well. This, we could never permit.

“For a time, it appeared you were learning. The disuse of nuclear weapons for decades, steps toward genuine disarmament, and the rise of the global economy were all positive signs. We began to breathe a little easier.

“Then imagine our shock when the Oracle told us of impending doom. Just as the world seemed to be settling down, the Oracle told us that as populations increased and resources—especially oil—became scarce, war, fueled in part by religious differences, would break out on a cataclysmic scale. With the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the eventual result would be the complete annihilation of both of our races.”

“So that’s why you fostered the creation of the new engine,” I added. “You thought if we weren’t dependent upon foreign oil to fuel the global economy, the threat of annihilation would go away.”

He nodded sadly. “That’s right. We thought the engine would be the answer. We took a page from your own history and created a town which would serve as the birthplace for an engine no longer dependent upon oil. But the Oracle surprised us by predicting that the possibility of war not only would not decrease, but would in fact, increase as moderate Arab states collapsed as oil revenues fell. We were at our wits’ end when we once more sensed the presence of God in our minds.

“It told us that when Christianity had failed to live up to its full potential, it had tried again to establish the right faith—this time without our help.”

“The Moslem faith,” I supplied.

“Exactly. However, the deity we revere is, as you might have guessed, not terribly worldly and tends to be idealistic. I suppose that is the nature of a true God. So corrections had to be made, both in Christianity and the Moslem faith, or religious war was virtually inevitable.”

It came to me suddenly. Maybe it was my religious training, but I knew at once what the ultimate purpose of Ovid was. “They won’t be the parents of the Antichrist,” I said slowly. “It’s not the Second Coming. They’re to be the parents of the second son of God.”

The Judge smiled slightly. “Not son—daughter.”

“No,” I shook my head. “That won’t work. Maybe Christians would accept a woman Messiah, but the Moslems would never do so.”

“They won’t have to,” he assured me. “Right now, in a remote corner of Syria, a young Moslem man is nearly ready to start his service to his god. He is being protected by some of our... friends—the gods of ancient Mesopotamia. He will preach a path of reconciliation and tolerance that will slowly take hold. Then, according to the Oracle, the son of the new Prophet and the daughter who is the new Messiah will meet. As they become a couple, so will the two most aggressive religions of the world united as well.”

“But that won’t work!” I blurted out. I regretted my words almost at once, for what I had said was the same thing others trained as I had been would say. In spite of my denial of God, I realized I had fallen back upon my religious education and had fallen victim to the underlying dogma. Mullahs and ministers alike would tend to reject the new religious thought, just as their counterparts had done before them. But like their counterparts throughout history, they could easily fall before the onslaught of new popular religious thought. Faith of the peoples of the world would trump the tired teachings of a vested clergy every time.

“You see it now, don’t you?” The Judge said softly. I could only nod, so he continued, “And do you see why I told you all of this?”

Yes, I could see that, too. The Judge hadn’t just told me to make me

understand that Professor Lowry had been so wrong. He had not agreed to spare Mark just because The Judge was being a nice guy. He had done all of this because he needed me, and he knew I would need Mark by my side if I were to fulfill my own part in all of this.

I knew now that my restored faith would lead me back into the ministry, with Mark as my husband. Together, we would begin to prepare the people, first of Ovid and later of the world, for what was to come. It was the role I was destined to fulfill, for after all, I was Joan—the Baptist.

As was usually the case, I awoke from my trance almost immediately. I was rewarded with a satisfied look from most of the gods, but the look on The Judge's face was absolutely triumphant. Susan, on the other hand, looked much as I probably did—and she appeared to be virtually in shock.

Who could blame us? We had both just learned that our children were to be the parents of a new Messiah—the founder of a new religion that would overturn everything we had previously believed.

I had been raised in my former life as a good Catholic, and while I had been relegated to the Baptist faith with my transformation, in the back of my mind I was still substantially Catholic. I always stuttered when we recited the Lord's Prayer in church, often forgetting the last part that most Protestant denominations added on. I had to fight the urge to cross myself or kneel at the appropriate moments during the service. And I had never quite gotten used to a church without the Stations of the Cross prominently displayed about the sides of the sanctuary.

So the Catholic in me rebelled at the very thought. My daughter was to become the new Virgin Mary... Hail Ashley, full of grace...?

I could see Susan was equally disturbed. We had never really discussed religion before. She and her husband attended the same church as we did, but maybe she had always been a Baptist, or at least a Protestant. Besides, while her son seemed destined to be the

new Joseph, that was hardly the same as being the Virgin Mother.

Come to think of it, hadn't The Judge said something to Joan about our children being the 'parents' of the new daughter of God? Not exactly, I suppose. Joan had used the term 'parents,' but The Judge had not contradicted her. Maybe it was better that way, I thought. A number of people I had known in both lives considered themselves good Christians but had difficulty accepting the virgin birth.

Come to think of it, the Moslems didn't accept the virgin birth either. If our granddaughter was to be accepted universally, was a virgin birth really required?

"Cindy," The Judge asked, "have you any more recent information on Ms. Sheppard?"

I looked a little confused, I'm sure. I had never been asked that before. "No, Your Honor. I'm sorry, I don't. Should I have?" Normally, my ability to delve into the stories of other transformees ended once they had reconciled themselves to their new lives.

"No," The Judge replied, adding, "at least not if they haven't changed their minds."

I smiled, relieved. "I'm pretty sure Joan hasn't changed her mind. Myra told me she and Mark planned to get married in August. Joan's father will be presiding."

The Judge nodded. "Yes," he agreed. "It would seem that she and Mark were made for each other after all."

Was that a small smile on his lips? I couldn't be certain.

"Please leave us," The Judge called out to the other gods. "I need to speak privately to our human guests."

All of them filed out wordlessly, except for Diana, who clasped both Susan and I by the hand and smiled. "We'll have time to talk about this later. But for now, be glad."

"Be of good cheer?" Susan asked ironically.

Diana's smile widened, as if the irony were of no matter. "Yes, be of

good cheer. You'll see: it will be wonderful for all of us—human and Olympian.”

When Diana had shown herself out, The Judge looked at Susan and me. “You were not to know about the plan for your progeny, but we had to be sure of Joan.”

“Yes,” Susan agreed more calmly than I would have expected. “Joan—like her predecessor, John, will be very key to the acceptance of the new Messiah. I’ve seen the Reverend Groenwald in action, and he was a very powerful speaker.”

I gave Susan a surprised glance. “You actually watched that televangelism crap?” I guess that was the Catholic in me coming out again.

“Much of it was crap,” Susan agreed. “But there was something about Reverend Groenwald that made you believe—even if he didn’t. Now, as Joan, she has her faith back. If she is as persuasive now as she was as a man, this plan could work.”

The Judge nodded. “Precisely so.”

“And if it doesn’t?” I countered, still sceptical.

“If it doesn’t,” The Judge explained seriously, “then the Oracle believes we are all doomed—my people and yours alike. You must understand, Cindy, that no one is more zealous in a conflict than a believer in divine absolutes. The Shiites and the Sunnis have killed each other for centuries over what most of us see as minor differences. Protestants and Catholics did much the same thing before they finally settled down. That was tolerable when swords and knives were in fashion, but it is unacceptable in a nuclear age when soon, even small, poor nations may have access to fission—or even fusion weapons.”

“But a Messiah...” I protested weakly.

“A Messiah is the only answer,” The Judge affirmed.

By the time, Susan and I left The Judge’s office, I had reconciled myself to being the grandmother of the founder of a new religious

belief. But I wasn't happy with it.

Susan and I spoke little on the way to our cars, but just before we parted, she asked, "Cindy, are you okay?"

"No," I admitted with a sigh. "But I will be."

Susan impulsively hugged me, and I hugged back, choked with emotion at having such a wonderful friend. As we broke, Susan smiled at me, but I could see her eyes were a little misty, too. "Let's have lunch tomorrow. *The Greenhouse* at noon?"

I smiled back. "I'd like that." We'd just meet there—unless a sudden call from The Judge brought us together sooner in the courtroom to introduce us to yet another new resident in the world's most unusual town.

By the time I got home, my near-tears had gone away. Jerry was still asleep on the couch, completely unaware that I had been gone. Even the deep-throated growl of a car engine—Officer's Mercer's police cruiser, I realized—failed to wake Jerry. I realized that Officer Mercer must have been watching out for my family while I was gone. That made me feel a lot safer.

Then, I walked into Ashley's room. The little darling was sleeping peacefully, her blanket kicked away and her thumb securely in her tiny mouth. Her hair was matted down, and I realized that it was getting long enough now to start styling it to make her look more like a little girl and less like a baby. Had Mary once looked like this is far-off Israel two thousand plus years ago? Probably. After all, she too, had been human.

"Dear God," I murmured softly, "I don't know if you can hear us or not. But please, God, bless and protect my family, and Susan's family as well. Let this plan work, for everyone's sake."

Then, I added one more item. "And dear God, please bless The Judge and all of his... people."

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The Professor published on [FictionMania](#) from 02/25/98 through 06/01/2009.

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